

The background of the entire cover is a romantic scene. A man and a woman are in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long, wavy red hair and is wearing a vibrant red, off-the-shoulder gown. The man has dark hair and is shirtless, with a white cloth draped over his left shoulder. They are standing in a snowy field. In the background, a large stone castle with multiple towers is visible under a pale, hazy sky. The scene is framed by decorative borders of holly leaves and red berries at the top and bottom.

EMMANUELLE DE MAUPASSANT

CHRISTMAS AT
CASTLE
DUNRANNOCH



THE CURSE OF CLAN DALREAGH
TWO HIGHLANDER ROMANCES

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About Emmanuelle de Maupassant



Emmanuelle lives with her husband (maker of tea and fruit cake) and her snuffle snoof, Archie, her favourite hairy pudding connoisseur of squeaky toys and bacon treats.

To be first in the know about new releases, and to receive another book from the Lady's Guide series as your own free gift, [visit Emmanuelle's website to sign up to her newsletter.](#)

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The Curse of Clan Dalreagh

***“The curse is upon us! Beware the bagpipes!
Each clansman shall meet his death!”***

Whenever the fearsome fetch of Camdyn Dalreagh, first chieftain, plays a ghostly rendition on the bagpipes, a death is close at hand... so legend goes.

But is the story of the curse really true?

Through the ages, Castle Dunrannoch has been a place of intrigue, ambition, and more than the occasional murder!

As the Christmas snow falls deep, our two intrepid heroines, Flora and Ursula, face danger within the ancient fortress walls.

Can they discover the truth before their loved ones meet a grisly end?

Two things are certain.

No lionhearted lady can turn a blind eye when there is a mystery to be solved.

And no laird's heart is safe when our heroines sweep into action.



This book contains two stories from the 'Lady's Guide' series:

The Lady's Guide to Mistletoe and Mayhem

and

The Lady's Guide to a Highlander's Heart



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The Lady's Guide to Scandal

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The Lady's Guide to Tempting a Transylvanian Count

The Lady's Guide to Egyptian Curses

The Lady's Guide to Havoc in a Harem

Each can be read as a 'stand alone' and in any order.

Amidst the wild Scottish mountains, the snow is falling deep, but Ragnall and Flora, Rye and Ursula's stories await to warm your heart.

My heroines battle many of the same challenges we do today—striving for independence and self-determination, while yearning for true love.

Like the women (and men) in these tales, you're stronger than you may realize, more resourceful and more determined.

As for happy endings, we all need to believe that things can get better if we persevere, that there is hope, and the chance to embrace a life of love and friendship and contentment.

with warmest wishes to you

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Em', written in a cursive style.

The Lady's Guide to a Highlander's Heart

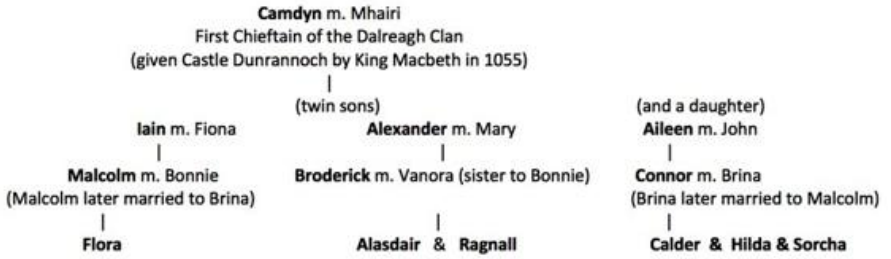
by Emmanuelle de Maupassant

A bride and groom each convinced of the other's treachery...

Upon the night a knife is plunged into her father's heart, headstrong Flora Dalreagh flees the forbidding Highlander to whom she has been hastily wed.

Entering his domain in the guise of a dairymaid, Flora never expects passion to burn as fiercely as her desire for revenge, but she soon discovers her secret is only one of many in the castle.

The Dalreagh Family Tree



Chapter 1

Castle Dunrannoch, Rannoch Moor, Scotland *December 20, 1166*

IN THE NORTHERN tower of the castle, the fire had near burnt its last. The candles were guttering low.

The young man pacing the room turned again on his heel. “Ye swore tae give me the privileges of a true son, but these years of loyalty mean naught.”

Malcolm Dalreagh fought to restrain his anger. “I am yer chieftain and ye’ll obey me, as ye’ve pledged in fealty since ye were a bairn.” No other would dare speak to him as his stepson had done this night. Only for his late wife’s sake did he seek to placate the cur.

“Aye, I see the way o’ things. Ye be blind tae Ragnall’s ambition and the deceit that runs in his blood, but ye hear the rumours o’ how his brother died—and none tae bear witness but Ragnall himself.”

Malcolm’s voice remained steady. “Rumour grows where men be envious. The fact remains that the alliance is fer the good o’ the clan. With Ragnall’s father dead, he holds the lairdship of Balmore and he’ll be seeking a wife. We mun secure a marriage without delay.”

“If that be the way of it, give him Sorch a or Hilda. Ma sisters are only a year or two younger than Flora, and her betrothal tae me was agreed years ago, upon ma father’s death.” Calder scowled. “It suited ye well enough then but I see ’twas an empty promise—a vow tae put ma mother in yer bed.”

Leaning across the table, Malcolm clenched his fists. “Take care, Calder. Brina was a fine woman and I lament her passing as deeply as I did Flora’s own mother. I dunnae take this decision lightly, but it mun be, and it shall. Ye ken as well as I, these are uncertain times, and we mun strengthen the position o’ the clan. The MacDonald and

the Douglas have been hungry tae seize our land since ma grandfather's time, when Camdyn shared Balmore and Dunrannoch between his sons. The division did naught tae stop their rivalry, and the clan has been all the weaker for it."

Calder narrowed his eyes. "I still dunnae ken yer eagerness tae marry yer daughter tae the whoreson of a trollop. I hear she made a pretty sight at the last, and her lover alongside."

In three strides, Malcolm grabbed Calder by the throat, his cheeks bright with rage. "Hold yer tongue, or I'll slice it from yer head, sworn son or nay. The sins o' Ragnall's mother were punished enough without being remembered on yer foul lips."

Gasping for air, Calder clutched at the older man's hands upon his neck, attempting to pull them away, but the chieftain's anger gave him strength.

With a final snarl, Malcolm pushed his stepson from him, then moved to the hearth, staring into the dying embers.

"Our new king is headstrong, and determined tae regain control o' Northumbria. There's talk of an alliance with France. If William rises against Henry, we cannae join the fray as we are. Tae survive any such battle, we mun stand shoulder tae shoulder with every Dalreagh, united whole of heart under the same banner. Ragnall's men would follow him tae the depths of Hell were he tae command it."

Passing a hand over his forehead, the Chieftain of Clan Dalreagh looked suddenly far older than his fifty years. "The handfasting shall take place on Hogmany night and one year hence Ragnall will return tae repeat his vows, and take Flora tae the marriage bed. She will be his, whether ye like it or nae, and when the day comes for him tae become Laird of Dunrannoch and chieftain in ma stead, ye'll bend the knee—as will she."



ABOVE, where the shadows clung thickest, the pale face pressed to the gap in the floorboards withdrew.

She had no love for her step-brother, but Flora had long accepted that the betrothal was her duty. What now, was this? A chill fixed about her heart.

Though her mind was her own and her soul would remain with

God, as Father Gregory had taught, her body would belong to her husband.

A man known for his savagery on the battlefield.

'Twas said he would stop at nothing to gain what he desired.

Sheltered though her life had been, Flora was not foolish enough to believe he desired her.

But, the lairdship of Dunrannoch and chieftaincy of the united clan? For that, a man would take to wife whomever came with the prize—even a scrawny maiden barely entering her womanhood.

And if she failed to please him?

Flora gave up a silent prayer that she would never find out.

Chapter 2

Chapel, Inner Courtyard of Castle Dunrannoch Evening, December 31, 1166

THE RIDE HAD BEEN but two hours and the ground, though hard-frosted, had provided sure footing for Ragnall's mount. He and all his men had been granted good welcome at Dunrannoch. The great hall was festooned with garlands of green, the hearths glowed warm, and the tables were generously provisioned. All honours and civilities had been observed and Malcolm had raised his first toast to his guests from Balmore.

Yet, Ragnall could not ignore his growing unease.

Something within Dunrannoch was amiss.

The bride who stood before him with eyes downcast was neither child nor woman. The perfect age most men would say. An age at which a female could be moulded to a man's liking, and this one seemed meek enough, though she was thinner than he'd have liked, and bore a pained look.

'Twas a relief her father deemed her too young for bedding—for Ragnall had not the appetite for such a bland morsel. Another year might bring more flesh on her bones, but as to whether she'd become a worthy chatelaine for his household, that would remain to be seen. The woman who held the keys to every door needed more strength than was apparent in this wee mouse.

As the monk bid them face one another, he made the sign of the cross over the length of Dalreagh tartan, then tied their wrists close. "Like this knot, ye shall be bound—from this moment forward and as long as ye shall live. May the vows ne'er grow bitter in yer mouths."

Ragnall clenched his jaw. The marriage 'twas a contract, pure and simple, to bring him Dunrannoch on Malcolm's death.

All would call him chieftain—every Dalreagh who'd whispered that he'd left his brother to die on the moor after falling from his horse; every man who'd jeered at his mother's fate, and who'd questioned the legitimacy of his blood.

If he were Broderick's own, only God knew, but his dark mane and blue eyes had been enough to sway his father to keep him under his roof. Fortune had dictated that his mother's lover bore the same flame-bright hues in his hair as Vanora herself.

The monk motioned for them to kneel and Ragnall cast his eyes again over his bride. Though her plaits were bound about her crown and covered in a fine veil, it was plain she was of the same colouring.

A stray lock, bracken-red, curled to touch the *arisaid* pinned at her shoulder. Her hair looked well against the russet tartan threaded with green, the length of fabric falling down her back and belted about her girlish waist.

Mayhaps 'twas that alone—that vividness in her colouring—which stirred his disquiet. Had his mother looked so on her wedding day?

He wondered what Malcolm saw when he beheld his daughter: the wife he'd wed twenty years ago, or the woman whom it was said he'd truly loved—Ragnall's mother, Vanora.

Better that she'd wed Malcolm in her sister's stead, but there was no merit in dwelling on such thoughts. The past was done.

"With these vows, yer lives are bound as one."

The girl's eyes fluttered to look at the monk as he uttered the words of betrothal.

"With these hands, ye shall embrace one another as man and wife. With these hands, ye shall hold the sons and daughters God blesses ye with."

The ever-present knot in Ragnall's stomach tightened.

Aye, may God bless me with the sons this clan needs.

His own father had been a tyrant, barely showing love for Alasdair, let alone the son whose birth remained forever in question. Ragnall had long vowed that it would be different when he had his own family. He'd do all in his power to ensure his wife's comfort, and she'd give him what he needed in return.

She seemed meek enough—disposed to obey, to do her duty. He'd want more than that, of course, but all things were achievable in time. Her affection would come, when she saw how important their

marriage was to him. His own happiness depended upon it, and the legacy of the clan. He wouldn't repeat his father's mistakes.

The girl's gaze had lowered at the mention of children and she bit at her lip but as the holy man urged her in her own response, she raised her eyes to meet Ragnall's and he recognized more than coyness. A flicker of defiance perhaps, though tempered by fear.

Certainly, the blush in her cheek was becoming; she might grow to be a beauty.

"Ragnall, Laird of Balmore, do ye take this woman tae be yer own? Do ye promise tae protect her, tae meet her physical needs, and tae beget upon her the children ordained by the Lord?"

"Aye." Ragnall addressed all who witnessed the betrothal—the girl's father and the others alongside. "I give all that a husband gives a wife, until ma dying breath."

Returning his glance to his bride, he was surprised to see her staring intently up at him with lips half-parted. For all her modesty, she was affected by the words.

By God, if he kissed her now, he'd swear she'd open to him. Deep in his baws came a heated ache and he let his imagination linger upon her mouth.

From across the room came a gruff cough from her father, pulling him from his reverie.

He'd a promise to keep, and a full year before he'd find out just how willing the wench was.

"Twas nae a marriage for love, but he would see right by the woman who was to be his wife—and perhaps there would be more pleasure in it than he dared hope.



TURNING for the twentieth time against her pillow, Flora wondered if she were the only one still awake.

The hubbub from the hall had quietened down some time ago. She'd stayed for the first footing, with one of the newer stable boys proudly carrying in shortbread and salt, a black bun and a brick of peat. After that, the men had grown riotous and she'd politely excused herself, knowing that the ale would eventually catch up with them.

Most would fall unconscious where they lay. It was the same every

year. In the morning, she'd find them sprawled over benches and tables, clutching poorly heads. A good bowl of porridge usually sorted them out.

She could hardly help being awake, of course. As of this very night, she was no longer simply Flora Dalreagh, daughter of their clan chieftain; she was a woman betrothed.

And the man to be her husband? Distant cousin though he was, she'd only met him once before, and had been too young then to take notice—but, there had been plenty to take notice of today, and everything they said about him appeared to be true.

Taller and broader than any other, he carried himself like the warrior he was, and there was a hardness to him she'd not seen in other men—as if he might reach behind and draw his sword at any moment.

As if he'd think nothing of swinging it wide and lopping off whomever's head was nearest.

He'd probably done so on many an occasion—on the battlefield. She wondered briefly how many men he'd killed. Not that it mattered whether it were one or five hundred. A soul dispatched in battle wasn't the same as a life taken under normal circumstances. It was just the way of things. Each clan had to protect its own.

Still, the imagining of it made her stomach turn.

What did it do to a man?

Could anyone be the same after they'd spilled blood?

Being a woman, she'd never know—for her duty was to her father, helping run the castle. She'd worked hard before the snows came, ensuring provisions were set by to get them through the winter months, preserving and pickling and smoking what they could; storing the rest.

Her duty was to her father and to her clan.

And now?

Another duty was to be hers, not just as daughter but as wife—and it caused her stomach to turn some more.

She was an innocent, of course; even Calder had never pushed her to give up what they'd both anticipated would be his with time. Of all the unmarried women in the castle, she probably knew a great deal less than most, but she knew more than nothing, thanks to Maggie.

Her maid was snoring soundly on her cot, having had more than a

little ale herself. Before passing out, she'd had more than a few opinions to share on Ragnall Dalreagh—not all of them uncomplimentary. To hear Maggie speak, the betrothal wasn't the worst thing—and certainly better than the match Flora had been expecting with Calder.

Flora turned again, pulling her legs away from the cold spot at the bottom of the bed.

A year from now, she wouldn't be in the bed alone—and Maggie wouldn't be in the corner cot.

Another wave of nausea passed over her.

Maggie had told her enough that she knew what was expected. A wife obeyed her husband in all things, no matter how vile they might seem—but a considerate husband knew to take the bedding gently.

Would Ragnall be considerate?

Across the room, Maggie gave another loud snort and shifted under her blankets.

It was hopeless. Flora might as well have someone in the room playing the bagpipes for all the sleep she was likely to find this night.

With a sigh, she plumped the pillow beneath her and willed her mind to find some peace but no more than a few moments passed before another sound carried to her ears.

A thin sound at first. A reedy repine. A long lament curling through the darkness.

Nay!

It couldn't be!

No one could be playing the pipes. There was not a body in the castle would thank whoever dared take up the instrument at this time of the night.

Clutching the quilt to her chest, Flora sat upright, listening keenly.

The pipes were growing louder. Not far off now but as if in the passageway.

"Maggie!" Flora hissed through the darkness. "Do ye hear it?"

The woman in the cot muttered something but didn't wake.

Still, the pipes were playing. They halted briefly by the door, so loud that Flora could hardly believe Maggie didn't wake, then the piper seemed to move on, towards the staircase beyond, and downward, to her father's chambers.

As the sound receded, Flora wondered at the quietness of the hall.

Had no one heard? But there was no shout—of revelry nor protest.

Bringing her feet to the floor, Flora fumbled for the over-gown draped close by, pulling it over her shoulders, then felt her way to the hearth, to light her tallow.

She considered waking Maggie, but there was no time to waste. The piper might have disappeared altogether by the time her maid gathered herself.

Entering the passageway, Flora cupped her hand to protect the flame from the cool draught. Shadows flickered over the narrow stone walls and then the confines of the stairwell as she descended. Though she trod softly, each step seemed to echo—yet no door opened and no voice called.

Only the pipes' wail drifted faintly from below but, upon reaching the lower floor, she saw no sign of anyone.

All was suddenly quiet and she hesitated a moment. She should return to bed but a stirring of unease brought her to her father's door. No matter how deeply in his cups, he would never take his rest anywhere else. Nevertheless, an urge came strong to reassure herself he was there and she lifted the latch.

Even by the dim tallow's light, Flora saw his form beneath the quilt. There he was, as he ought to be. Why then did a prickle move over her skin? Why did the darkness here make the room feel changed?

Hurrying to his side, she set the candle upon the chest.

"Father."

She brushed back his hair and leaned close.

His eyes were half open but their lustre was gone, and his lips were still.

No breath.

Her own froze in her breast.

"Father!"

She pressed her palm to his cheek and found it warm.

A tug at his shirt loosened the yoke from his neck, and his head lolled to one side.

Gasping, she saw what she had not before.

The quilt was bunched upon his chest. Pulling it back, she saw the dirk buried between his ribs, thrust upward at a sharp angle, and the blood seeping from the wound. The ornate carving upon the hilt

caught the candlelight. 'Twas his own blade!

"Father." With a sob, Flora laid her head over his heart.

No movement there, no beat, no life—but the warmth of his body told her some evil force had but recently done its work.

Starting back, she looked to the farther reaches of the room. Though her hand trembled, she lifted the flame and made herself search each corner. Had the foul fiend lurked there, she would have been helpless to his whim, but there was naught in the room save herself and the flesh that had once been her father.

Lowering the candle, she turned to him again, closing the eyes that no longer saw. She kissed his forehead and took his hand in hers.

She feared not the dark, nor any spirit wandering in it. No supernatural being had ended her father's life. That deed lay at the door of some living creature within the castle—and only one man had motive to do such a thing.

Only one man.

He who would greet the morning not just as laird of Balmore, but Dunrannoch too, and chieftain of all.

An ambitious man, and heartless.

A man who cared not who stood in his path.

The man to whom she was bound.

Chapter 3

Castle Dunrannoch *Approaching dawn, January 1, 1167*

“WAKE UP, MAGGIE.”

The maid started at the abrupt shake Flora gave her.

“I need yer help, and quickly.”

“’Tis still night, ma lady.” Maggie blinked, squinting against the illumination of the candle flame.

“It is.” Flora threw back Maggie’s blankets and pulled her upright. “And the best time for an escape. At least six hours until dawn light and they’ll start searching.”

“But, what’s all this aboot? Ye cannae be gallivanting off in the dark.” She rubbed at her eyes. “Is it a game, mistress? I thought all were a’bed hours ago.”

“Not a game, nay.” Flora tugged Maggie to her feet and put a shawl around her. “Something horrible has happened.” Flora’s voice caught in her throat but she summoned all her strength to remain calm. There was no time to lose.

“Maggie, ye know the legend o’ the Dalreagh curse?”

“O’course. Lyle McDoon placed a curse on the clan, after Camdyn, the Wolf o’ Dunrannoch, refused him the hand o’ his youngest daughter. He vowed that every male heir o’ the Dalreagh line would perish an untimely death. ’Tis a wondrous tale, though ye know I’m nae superstitious like most folk. Yer father is well in years and has ne’er even had the croup. I take such things with a pinch o’ salt.”

“So do I, Maggie, but—” Flora gulped back her tears. “I heard the piper, I swear.”

“Camdyn’s ghost?” Maggie looked suddenly fearful. “As plays whenever a member o’ the clan is due tae meet his end?”

“Perhaps.” Flora grasped Maggie by the shoulders. “I cannae say, but I went tae ma father’s chamber, Maggie, and—” Flora’s voice failed her again.

“Wae ist, mistress? Ye mun tell me.”

In answer, Flora drew out the dagger from her pocket.

“Saints preserve us! There be blood on it!”

“Hush!” Flora pressed her finger to Maggie’s lips. “Ma father is killed, but I dunnae believe ’tis the curse.” Setting her chin, she replaced the dirk to her skirts. “Someone wicked resides here tonight and they’ve brought about his death.”

Maggie’s eyes grew round. “A murderer! ’Tis a terrible sin, but I dunnae ken why ye wish tae flit. The castle be the safest place for ye.”

Flora took the woman’s hands in her own. “I believe I know the man responsible.”

“Ye do?”

Flora nodded. She’d heard the stories, that Ragnall had brought about his brother’s riding accident, to bring lands into his own hands—and his own father had died not long ago. Had the causes been natural? If he were capable of doing away with his own kin, his ambition surely knew no bounds.

With Flora’s father dead, Ragnall would be proclaimed chieftain before the body was cold.

“Aye, Maggie.” Flora set her chin. “The Laird of Balmore—as sleeps alongside his men in the hall this night. I agreed tae the marriage through duty tae ma father, but what duty commands a woman tae wed the beast she believes killed her own kin?”

The maid nodded sadly. “’Tis the devil’s work, right enough. Yer father entrusted the laird with not just yer hand and yer future safekeeping, but the wellbeing of every Dalreagh soul. I ne’er did hear o’ such wickedness. There be no honour in it, for certain—only greed and high ambition. Who knows what such a man is capable of. I hardly like tae say it, but I would fear for yer safety, ma lady. There’s naught tae hold him tae treatin’ ye kindly.”

“Ye see why I need tae go?”

“O’ course—and if ye be leaving, I’m coming wi’ ye. We’ll go tae ma brother’s croft. ’Twill be hard in the snow, but nae more than four hours on foot... But, what shall I tell them, ma lady? I cannae say who ye truly are, or yer plan will be for naught. We mun hide ye good and

proper.”

Flora squeezed Maggie’s hand. “I’ll be Florrie—another maid in service. Say perhaps I wasnae treated well and want a fresh start; that I dunnae wish tae talk on it. I’ve some small coin I can bring with me, tae thank yer brother for taking me in.”

“Aye, it could work. Now, as ye say, we ought tae be off, tae be well away by the time the castle wakes. Mayhaps, ye might use yer writin’ skill as Father Gregory taught ye, and leave a note tae put them off the scent for when they do come a’lookin’.”

“I’ll say I’m distraught at the betrothal, it being against ma will.” Flora’s mind whirled with the possibilities. “I’ll say I’m heading towards the mountains and hope tae perish. If the snow falls again tomorrow, it would swiftly bury a body. They’d know it would be impossible tae find me—at least until Spring—and, even then...”

“Chances are, the animals would have taken ye; ’tis the surest way tae make them cease the search. As fer slippin’ oot, I’ll warrant there be only one man awake on the gate tonight. ’Twill be nae bother tae distract him wi’ a Hogmany kiss while ye make fast yer plan, ma lady—and I’ll join ye by the trees as soon as I can.”

Flora nodded her thanks. She was leaving behind everything that had mattered. Leaving her father to be discovered in the morn. Leaving behind not just the luxuries of castle life, but everyone she’d cared for. Only Maggie, her dear companion, would be by her side.

The path ahead was uncertain, but staying was the one thing she couldn’t bear.

Clasping the hilt of the dirk in her pocket, she made a silent vow. Only when Ragnall Dalreagh’s blood marked the same blade would she wipe it clean. Until then, her father’s crimson stain would remain, like rust upon weary metal, to remind her of the dark deed she must avenge.

Chapter 4

The dairy at Castle Balmore, upon Rannoch Moor December 23, 1168

“REMEMBER NOW, Florrie. They won’t drop their milk if they detect a strange hand. Best way is tae let them know ye be friendly.” Maggie scratched the tuft of the nearest cow and gave Flora an encouraging smile. “They be no different from goats when all’s said and done.”

Flora couldn’t help feeling doubtful.

The goats back on the croft didnae have horns longer than her arm, nor hooves big enough to crush a man’s head. They weren’t tall enough to look her straight in the eye when she was talking to them and they didn’t lumber about like these beasts. In truth, the goats were probably a deal more canny, as well as more agile. As far as she knew, no cow had ever climbed onto the roof of someone’s cottage and begun eating the reeds.

Still, she’d learn their ways, just as she’d learnt a great many things in the two years past. Maggie’s family had been exceeding kindly toward her, and patient, teaching her the skills she’d needed to make herself useful.

They just hadn’t had any cows.

There had been a herd at Castle Dunrannoch, of course, but it hadn’t been her place to have anything to do with milking them.

Still, she could hardly complain. At least they were out of the weather and, with the livestock crowded into the enclosed space, the room was pleasantly warm, if rather lively under the nose.

Maggie had tried for several weeks to dissuade her from coming but, as soon as Flora had heard Castle Balmore was seeking to employ extra maids through the festive season, she’d refused to let the matter rest. Only once they’d gotten here had they been told that it was the

milking that needed seeing to.

The cow twice blinked long lashes and snuffled at the hay nestled in Flora's palm, then gave it a wet scrape with the rough of its tongue.

"That's it, look, she does like ye." Maggie beamed from across the other side of the milking parlour.

Flora smiled back half-heartedly. If her friend only knew what she was planning, she doubted she'd be so cheerful. It was the one thing she'd never felt able to confide to Maggie, for she would surely have done all in her power to prevent Flora from committing the grave sin she intended. Certainly, she would never have agreed to accompany Flora to the laird's home. Flora had been obliged to spin a story of wanting to see what sort of chieftain Ragnall was proving to be, and had undertaken a promise never to remove her scarf from about her hair.

Though other girls on the moor bore the same hue in their locks, Maggie was fearful Flora would be unmasked and obliged to answer far too many questions.

To Maggie's mind, the past was the past and, terrible though it was, she believed Flora ought to put it behind her. That old life was done and she was free, at least, of the burden of marrying the man responsible for her father's death.

For Flora, nothing was in the past, and nothing forgotten. Her one regret was the impulsiveness that had made her flee on that terrible night.

Ragnall Dalreagh might have promised her father that he'd not lay a hand on her until the repeated vows of the wedding one year after, but a man capable of murder would hardly bother to keep such a contract. And, with all the assets of the Dalreagh clan under his ownership, Ragnall would surely do as he pleased.

Tender of years though she'd been, Flora knew the flame of lust in a man's eye and she'd caught a certain glimmer on that terrible night—even as they'd stood before Father Gregory in the holy kirk of Dunrannoch.

If I'd only waited, I'd have found myself in Ragnall's bed. Once he was asleep, how easy it would have been!

Flora had never ceased thinking of her vow, and how she might again get close enough to the Laird of Balmore. Close enough to sink her dagger into his wicked heart, or to slit his throat.

As he gurgled his dying breath, she'd make sure he knew who she was and why he was meeting his end at her hand.

It didn't sit well with her to deceive Maggie, but she was determined to avenge her father. Once the deed was done, she'd reveal her identity and tell her tale. She'd no fancy that it would be easy to make others understand, but she was sure Calder would step in to support her voice. After all, he was the only other Dalreagh of the male line who might take over if Ragnall was discredited. Otherwise, her revenge was likely to come at the cost of her own life.

"Noo, wipe the teats with the wet linen, Florrie, for there's right enough muck on them, and pull a couple of times before aiming for the bucket, tae flush through any dirt. 'Tis just the same as wi' the goats." Maggie settled herself on her stool and got to work, humming the festive ditty as had been sung in the kitchen the night before.

Everyone else in the castle seemed in fine fettle—but for herself. Flora could barely recall the last Yuletide she'd been truly happy. A time long before, when her mother was still alive, she supposed, but that was far too many years ago to provide comfort. Lady Brina had been kind in her way but her stepmother had seemed to have little interest in Flora, other than as the bride she wished to secure for Calder, her son.

To her shame, Flora hadn't been able to summon much grief on her passing.

Sighing, she rested her cheek against the cow, leaning beneath to clean off the teats. At her touch, the animal gave a snort and fidgeted its hooves.

She could hardly blame it. The whole process was undignified, so Flora had often thought.

Maggie's sister-in-law had given birth three times since Flora's arrival, yet she still wasn't at ease with seeing the babes at their mother's breast. Naturally, a bairn had to have its sustenance, but the poor woman had been obliged to sit and be milked in much the same way as this cow.

That was one thing, at least, Flora knew she'd be spared—for she'd no intention of being any man's wife, and there would be no wee ones without the minister's words binding her to a man.

In theory, she was already bound, of course—to the fiend who'd murdered her father—and, seeing as the beast himself hadn't bothered

to wed anyone else, the contract remained.

More than once she'd had pause to think on that, since he must have believed her dead, just as she planned. In any case, none of Ragnall's men ever came seeking her. The chieftain of the clan was free to take another bride in that case, and it was long overdue. Every laird needed his heir, after all.

Although her father had never been one for immoral shenanigans, she knew many of those under his protection hadn't been so scrupulous. No doubt, Ragnall wasn't short of women willing to warm his bed—and plenty who'd oblige without a ring on their finger.

Oh yes, it probably suited Ragnall very well not to have been tied to a little peely-walley thing with barely a curve to fill a man's hands.

For some reason, the notion stoked the resentment in Flora's heart. With a puff of frustration, she gave the teats a last, brisk wipe. The udder's owner shifted from hoof to hoof once more and sent its fringed tail to swipe Flora's face.

"Stop that, ye daft coo. Can ye no see I'm here tae relieve ye? Stand ye still while I see about ye."

"Easy there, Florrie." Maggie called again from across the room. "Mayhaps, she be tender, or missing her wee calf."

Gently, Flora squeezed to draw down the first milk and the cow switched its tail again, giving Flora a mouthful of wiry ginger hair.

"What did I tell ye? I cannae do this with ye swittering at ma face." Flora heaved against the cow, only to have it push straight back.

"Ye wild beastie! Have ye no manners?" Flora set her hands to the task again. This time, she managed a little milk, but barely enough to consider being ready to start filling the bucket. She increased her pressure but got nothing for her efforts but a measly trickle.

A chicken strolled in, scratching in the straw directly under the cow's rear end before squatting to lay an egg next to Flora's bucket. With a satisfied cluck, it pranced off again.

"Ye see that, do ye? There's someone as knows what they're about." Flora berated the cow again. "It be yer turn, noo, and nae more fussing."

Parting her knees, Flora reached under as far as she could and gave each teat a simultaneous squeeze, considerably harder this time. The cow gave a disgruntled moo and shifted position, sending a good squirt of milk directly into Flora's eye. With a cry, she wobbled on the

stool and toppled backward.

No sooner had she landed in the straw, skirts flying upward, then a low, rumbling chuckle came from somewhere behind. "If this be some new technique for milking, I dinnae ken how effective it may be."

"'Tis this daft beastie that's causing the trouble and not—" Flora's mouth dropped. No more than three steps from where she lay sprawled was the man whose face had haunted her these two years past.

In her memory, he was just as tall and broad-shouldered, sporting the blue eyes and wild curls of the Dalreagh clan but, on all the nights she'd conjured his face, it was always to picture him writhing in agony as she pierced him with the dirk.

Not once had she imagined him wearing this expression of amusement.

"Dinnae let me stop ye." Folding his arms, he leant against the wall of the dairy, grinning down at her. "I can see I'll learn a thing or two by watching ye."

The hatred coursing through Flora's veins grew thick and black. How dare he make jest after all he'd done. Truly, he was without conscience—a murderer fit for league with the devil himself.

"Och!" Maggie's head appeared above the rump of her cow then disappeared again as she dropped a swift curtsy. "'Tis the laird!"

Ragnall Dalreagh inclined his head in recognition of the courtesy. "And ye fine lassies must be among the new members o' the household."

"Aye." Maggie scurried around, wiping her hands on her apron. "I'm Maggie McKintosh from the far side o' the moor, and this is ma cousin, Florrie."

"Pleased tae meet ye. There's always a deal o' work, so ye'll be kept busy." He reached down to grab Flora's hands and, before she could protest, he'd raised her to her feet.

She'd grown several inches since he'd last laid eyes on her, both in height and in womanly dimensions, but she felt a sudden stab of fear as he looked down into her face, studying her intently.

His brow creased a moment, as if trying to place her features.

Thank goodness Maggie had insisted on her wearing the headscarf.

Maggie had assured her that she looked quite different to the scrawny young thing who'd come to live on her brother's croft two

Hogmanies ago, and here was the proof—for the laird seemed not to recognize her.

Realizing, suddenly, that he was still holding her hands, she snatched them away.

“We’d best be getting on, ma Lord. The cows won’t milk themselves. There’s another twenty waiting after these two.”

“So there are.” His mouth quirked upward. “I’ve a good deal tae manage here at Balmore, but I keep the count of ma cattle, at least.”

Flora felt her cheeks burn. Of course the man knew his own livestock.

She dipped her curtsey, righted her stool and sat upon it once more. Then, positioning the bucket, sent up a prayer that the blasted cow would be more forthcoming and not cause her further embarrassment.

No sooner had she leant forward than she felt two warm arms wrap around her and a hard chest press to her back.

“The trick is in keeping yer patience while showing the beastie who’s in charge.” To her consternation, Ragnall was directing her to the udder. “Wrap yer fingers firmly around the top tae trap the milk, then squeeze it down with a rhythmic motion.”

Flora sat frozen as Ragnall moved his hands over hers. “Next, open yer palm and draw down again, letting the teat refill.”

As he guided her, a thin stream of milk descended, hitting the bucket with pleasing surety. The sight filled her with sudden pleasure. However, she was all too aware of Ragnall pressed up against her—and she a total stranger, as far as he knew. It seemed she’d surmised rightly. The laird was an outrageous flirt. No doubt, if she gave him the least encouragement, he’d have her down on the hay.

The thought sent another wave of heat through her. The last thing she wanted was to imagine those hands, however strong and commanding, laying claim to what lay under her skirts—and she was no ninny. If the laird wanted to give her a tumble, she’d have no choice but to comply, and Maggie would be powerless to intervene.

Those hands might be skilled with the livestock but they were also the hands that had sent her father’s dirk into his heart. That, she would never forget!

She cursed having left the dagger with her bundle in the hayloft over the stalls, where she and Maggie slept. If she’d kept it on her, she

might have pushed it between his ribs and have been done with it.

Instead, she made do with driving her elbow there and twisted on the stool, hoping to push him off the back. Let him sprawl in the hay and see how he liked it! But, he seemed to anticipate even that simple action and she came up against the unmoving solidity of his torso and his cheek alarmingly close.

Suddenly there was but a hair's breadth between their lips.

His voice caught as he laughed again but, this time, there was a sensuous quality, as if he were but playing a game with her, and she was the little rabbit caught in his snare.

"Ye may not be the best at milking cows, fair Florrie, but ye must have other talents." His fingers found a stray curl worked loose beneath her ear and she felt their touch upon her neck.

Swallowing, she attempted to lean back but his other hand held strong against her waist, preventing her escape. "I'm only here tae help with the milk. I've nae other talents tae speak of."

"I'm sure that's nae true."

For a moment, Flora's heart seemed to stop.

"Everyone knows dairy maids make the best kissers, after all." The laird moistened his lips. "Will ye nae show me?"

"Certainly not!" Putting her palms to his chest, she attempted to push him off again but Ragnall Dalreagh's feet were too firmly planted on either side to give her any leverage.

"Ye're nae afraid tae find out ye cannae kiss?" As he said it, the tip of his nose, just as warm as the rest of him, bumped hers.

Truly, the man was audacious. She gave another push. "O' course I can kiss, just as well as anyone, but ye won't be finding out."

The low, rumbling laugh came again and, for the briefest moment, she felt Ragnall's soft lower lip and his chin, rough with stubble.

In shock, she made to protest, realizing only too late that he was likely to view her parted lips as an invitation.

However, the next moment, he was on his feet. "I can see ye be shy, and there's naught wrong with that, but I will find out yer other talents, Mistress Florrie." Standing above her, he gave a slight wink. "When ye've done practising yer technique on those soft teats, bring some o' the milk tae add tae ma bathing water."

Nodding to Maggie, who'd come round to see what the fussing was, he turned on his heel, leaving the two women alone again with

the cattle.

“Och, Florrie!” Maggie shook her head, tutting gravely. “This means only one thing, ye ken.”

Flora was also in little doubt.

As she’d anticipated, the laird was used to having his way with any woman who took his fancy and, today, it happened to be her. A strange thrill passed through her, shivering the hairs on her arms and causing a disturbing ache deep within her belly.

Had the time truly come?

Would she now get close enough to take her revenge?

Chapter 5

Later that day...

FLORA STOOD outside Ragnall's private chamber with two pails of milk. The dirk, retrieved from her bedding, hung heavy in her pocket. In his bath, the laird would be defenceless. She had only to catch him unawares and revenge would be hers.

Unfortunately, Ragnall was not alone.

She leaned closer. The laird's voice, low and rumbling, was distinctive. Of the other two she wasn't sure. The door was open but a crack.

It seemed prudent to listen.

She'd never witnessed her father's private audiences with clan members, but it might be beneficial to understand the state of things within the Dalreagh clan. Away on the croft, they'd rarely heard of castle matters.

She caught only snatches but the discussion was heated.

"The cur seduced ma sister and now asks tae marry her!" declared the most churlish of the voices.

"And what is yer sister's mind?" asked the laird.

"Like a fool, she loves him, but 'tis by the by, for the match was nae of ma choosing. 'Twas Domnall here who contracted tae marry the wench some six months past, and noo we find she's quickening."

"Aye!" The third, Domnall, spoke. "And makes ma blood hot tae think of her deflowered and carrying the bastard's child. I seek yer blessing, laird, tae draw swords against him and take Mhairi tae wife."

"And what of this child?" asked the laird again.

"The bairn can be raised tae tend the sheep and work with the rest. At least I ken Mhairi's able tae bear childer. Once I've wedded her, there'll be plenty more bairns tae offer comfort," reasoned Domnall.

There was a pause.

Flora pressed her ear closer still. It wasn't uncommon for such things to occur but she was interested to hear what the laird would say on the matter.

"A man's honour isnae tae be trifled with," mused the laird. "But nae more is a woman's. If the lass loves him and he has the means tae support her, it may be wiser tae let her go, Finlay."

There were murmurs of dissent before the room fell quiet again.

"If ye take her against her will, Domnall, she'll resent ye for the rest of yer days. 'Tis nae a marriage I'd encourage."

Flora found herself nodding. There were few women who had the privilege of marrying exactly where they pleased. Alliances were vital. Her own betrothals had been example enough of that—first to Calder and then to Ragnall. Her duty had been to obey her father, regardless of her personal feelings.

Nevertheless, the men seemed to be accepting the laird's advice.

There was a scraping of chairs and Flora stepped back from the door just as it was pulled open. The two men looked her over briefly, then passed by, disappearing into the gloom of the passageway.

Within the room, a well-stoked fire danced bright flames in the hearth. Ragnall stood beside, dressed in a loose robe, belted at the waist, a great wolfhound at his feet.

"Ah, 'tis ye at last, Florrie." Glancing up from his petting of the dog, he gave a weary smile. "And I've fond want, lass. Ye'd think men would have a care nae tae bring their disputes on the eve o' the festivities, but there's nae rest for Murdo and I."

The hound looked up at him with adoring eyes and gave his master's hand an affectionate lick.

Flora frowned. How easily he spoke of his duties, as if they were fairly gotten rather than by black deed.

She crossed the room with her pails, emptying the milk into the waiting copper tub. "Ye wish me tae help ye wash, ma lord." Though he appeared nonchalant, his blue eyes followed her intently.

A strange sensation passed through her. As Flora Dalreagh, no man had dared look with such obvious interest; at least, none but Calder. On the croft, she'd been treated as one of the family. To find herself made such a study of was unnerving. Nervously, she tucked her hair behind her ear, glad once more for the scarf.

“Aye, lass. That I do.” In one swift motion, Ragnall shrugged off the robe, revealing himself quite naked beneath.

A flush rose to her cheeks. She’d anticipated his nakedness but to bare himself so blatantly! Her inclination was to turn away but she refused to let him think her timid. He might think it amusing to flaunt himself before her but she wouldnae give him the pleasure of seeing her put out! Meaning to keep her eyes upon his face, she held her ground, staring straight back at him, but the rest of Ragnall Dalreagh proved too distracting to ignore.

She’d seen Maggie’s brothers bathe in the stream. A good ten years Ragnall’s junior, their slender bodies bore no resemblance to the man before her.

The hair which descended over his abdomen grew thicker at his groin and continued on his great thighs. As for what sprung between them, she’d had no idea a man’s member could be so thick, nor that it could be that ruddy colour. The bulging tip, glistening wet, was almost purple.

When she raised her eyes again, she found he was looking back, and smiling with a certainty of having his way that sent a jolt through her—anger, and something else. She wasn’t sure what exactly, but it made her pulse race.

“Ye may soap ma hair, lassie, and talk tae me if ye will.” He stepped into the tub, lowering himself until the milky water covered the parts Flora had been admiring.

Now was the time. He would have no idea of her intention until the knife plunged through his throat. She had only to summon her courage but, faced with her moment of action, her heart pounded. She must do more than merely pierce the skin. She must either open his throat entirely, or drive the blade deep through the sinew. Half measures would send him thrashing and crying out for help. He might easily wrench the weapon from her hand; might easily overcome her.

The dog, meanwhile, watched with curious eyes.

“I hope ye be settling, lass. ’Tis hard to be away from all ye know.” Dipping over, he cupped water generously upon his head. “The soap be on the side, if ye’ll be so kind.”

Curse him!

How could she end the man’s life when he was being so infernally polite—and with that great lummux of a dog gazing on?

Picking up the block laid upon the washcloth, she raised it to her nose, inhaling the scent of heather. She would do this, washing the man's hair: a last act of respect before undertaking what she must. Meanwhile, she needed to remain calm—to do naught that might arouse his suspicion. "Aye, 'tis nae so easy being divided from those we love."

And ye were the one to part me from my beloved father, ye villain!

Ragnall leant back against the rim and closed his eyes as she massaged across his scalp, then moaned when she pushed her thumbs into the base of his neck.

"Ye've a gentle touch, lass." Sitting up again, he bent forward, the easier for her to wash through the suds.

Taking a small jug, she did so, and the rivulets ran across the hard muscles of his shoulders.

Moving further down, she leant forward. The next she knew, his thumb was grazing her nipple, dampening the linen of her smock.

In surprise, she jumped back. "What're ye doing!"

He'd pushed the hair from his eyes and was looking at her through wet lashes. "I'm sure ye know, lass. I didnae bring ye here only to help me bathe. 'Tis company I need."

He beckoned her closer. "I shallnae do aught against ye will. 'Twill be pleasure for us both, if ye but join me."

"Join ye?" Flora's heart began to pound.

"Why, in the tub o'course." Ragnall offered his smile again. "'Twill be a squeeze, but if ye sit astride, we may accomplish things to mutual satisfaction."

Urgh! The man was insufferable! As if she'd gain pleasure from seeing to his carnal needs!

"I must tell ye, I'm shocked ye would suggest such a carry on." Flora had little difficulty summoning her righteous indignation, though it did not escape her that, if anyone had a right to enjoy her body, it was the very man stretched out before her. "Ye should know, I'm saving myself for the marriage bed."

Ragnall nodded gravely. "Yer sense o' virtue does ye credit but, if ye do decide tae let me love ye, and the good Lord sees fit tae send a bairn tae yer belly, I'll take care of ye."

A rush of fury rose from the pit of her stomach. So, that was the way it was. He took them to his bed and then placed his by-blows

about the castle. On that score, half the children set to fetch and carry were likely his!

She hardly realized how hard she was squeezing the soap until it flew upward, out of her hands. Hitting the floor again, it skittered away.

Instinctively, Flora stepped forward, only to place her foot upon the bar as it bounced back from the edge of the tub.

The hound, thinking some game was afoot, leapt to its feet and bounded over. Knocked askew, Flora found herself toppled, flying forward over the rim of the copper bath and, with a great splash, landing on the hulking body within it.



RAGNALL BARELY HAD time to brace himself as she launched through the air. Her knee missed his groin by a mouse's puff and she knocked the breath from his chest, but it took only a moment for him to recover and appreciate the feel of her. With her clothing sodden, the fullness of her breasts was clearly visible through the clinging cambric of her bodice and she'd parted her legs naturally around his own, affording his thickness a comfortable resting place.

Bringing his hands to her hips, he made soothing noises. "Are ye alright, lass?"

Her lower lip, so full and pink, was trembling.

Ripe for kissing.

It would be a good place to start.

He'd long ago learnt that the best way to unlock a woman's ardor was to go gently. A teasing sort of seduction usually had the surest results, with the woman herself soon taking charge and showing what it was she wanted. There was never a need for a man to force himself on a woman. Considerate caresses did all the work for him.

As for this one, he'd a feeling there was a strong vein of passion, if he could but persuade her to let him be the recipient.

Next year, he'd seek another alliance, and beget the heir the clan needed. Until then, he could hardly be expected to remain celibate, and the spark in Florrie's eyes was telling him that she was as drawn to him as he was to her.

A crease furrowing her brow, she was squirming to right herself

and succeeding only in dislodging her gown, so that her sleeve dropped low, revealing one smooth, milk-white shoulder. Any more of that and she'd expose her breast completely.

His imagination was already palming its weight, sliding a hand over slippery wet skin, while his other, in the small of her back, drew her close. Her breast would fall within the warmth of his mouth, the taut peak of her nipple a perfect fit between his lips.

His arousal, swollen hard, leapt at the thought.

"Stop that!"

Her exclamation brought him abruptly to his senses. "Why, lass, I've nae begun. Though it will only be a matter of lifting yer skirts to remedy that."

"Yer 'thing'." She pushed against his chest. "Whatever ye're doing with it, make it stop."

A throaty laugh escaped him. "'Tis all yer doing, Florrie. I didnae tell ye tae fling yerself atop me, did I? Ma body is only responding to the feel o' yers, and the more ye do wriggle, the more the effects are noticeable."

She fell silent at that, her expression distrustful.

It occurred to him that she'd less experience with a man than he'd guessed at. He'd certainly have to take things slower. He made sure he looked into her eyes and not at the curve of what threatened to burst from her bodice. "Give me a kiss, Florrie, and then I'll help ye tae yer feet. After that, if ye wish for more, find yer way tae ma chamber this evening. As I said before, I'll do naught tae harm ye."

He could see her giving the proposal consideration.

"A single kiss." Her gaze lowered to his lips and, to his amusement, she worried at her own, running her tongue along their edge.

"Aye." Ragnall swallowed back a moan as the lass shifted herself, inadvertently rubbing against that part of him that wanted a good deal more.

She eyed him warily again. "And ye swear nae tae grab me."

"I do. Whatever happens between us shall be at yer instigation, lass."

Though she continued to frown, she lowered her mouth to his, and Ragnall felt the sweet brush of her lips, feather soft. He caught the scent of hay and the clinging fragrance of milk mixed with earthier tones.

Instinctively, he brought his hand to her nape, opening his mouth a little, hoping she would venture her tongue within, then worked his fingers beneath the knotted fabric of her headscarf, wishing to feel the silkiness of her hair.

As the cloth fell away, she gave a cry and drew back suddenly. Opening his eyes, Ragnall blinked at the vision before him. With her flame-red locks cascading wild and her face flushed, she was disarmingly beautiful.

Her looks were the sort a man dreamed of or, rather, it was as if he'd already met her in a dream. There was something familiar in the slant of her mouth and the uplift of her eye, and in that particular hue of red that crowned her.

However, whatever she saw in his face, it gave the lass a fright. Placing her knee full in his stomach, she levered herself up and swung from the bath, sending water sloshing across the floor, her soaked skirts flapping.

Murdo gave a mournful whine as the door banged shut behind her and, sinking back beneath the water, Ragnall sighed deeply. There would be only one remedy for what he needed from Mistress Florrie. He could but hope that her curiosity would bring her to him sooner rather than later—or it wouldn't be only the haggis swollen to bursting by Hogmany night.

Chapter 6

Before dawn, Christmas Eve

FOR THE HUNDREDTH TIME, Flora berated herself.

She'd wavered when she should have been strong.

If she'd killed him when she'd had the chance, none of this would have happened. Thank the Lord, despite the scarf slipping away to reveal her hair, he seemed not to have recognized her.

At the time, she'd surmised giving in to the kiss would be the easiest way to get what she wanted—a helping hand out of the bath, and away from that hulking brute. Admittedly, she'd not much experience. The only kisses she'd received in the past had been on her cheek or the hand. Not even Calder had tried to put his mouth on hers, and it had never occurred to her to invite him to do so.

It had lasted but a moment. She'd been aware of the soft bristle of his beard and the fresh scent of the soap on his skin. Aware too of the hardness of his body beneath her. Not just in the part that was alarming, but all over. The man had a warrior's body, battle-hardened, the skin taut over his muscles.

She hadn't wanted to kiss him. Not in the least.

But she'd let her lips touch his. Just enough to allow him to let her go. It had meant less than nothing. Why then, did she keep thinking of it?

One thing was certain. She wouldn't make the same mistake again—of letting her softer feelings interfere with what needed to be done.

She was a Dalreagh, not a coward, and she wouldn't shrink from taking the revenge that was her due. Her father had been murdered, and she would never forget that. If it was with her dying breath, she would avenge him.

All the night, she'd hidden from Ragnall, knowing he was in his

chamber, waiting. Now, Maggie and the others around her slept, exhausted from their labours, their blankets pulled tight to their chins, while she fingered the dirk, testing its sharpness on her thumb, hardening her heart for what must come.

Today, there would be feasting. She would make sure Ragnall saw her; would make sure that his invitation was remembered. She would go to him and, when he was replete from whatever it was a man did with a woman, slumbering upon his pillow, she would stab him through.

There would be an end to it, and she would deal with the consequences. Perhaps the truth of her story would be believed, and she would return to Dunrannoch as a free woman. If not, she would undoubtedly be put to death as a murderess herself.

And what of the justice that was meted out beyond the grave?

Was there a special place in hell for women who murdered their betrothed husbands? Father Gregory had never mentioned it but she suspected he'd only ever told her what he'd thought relevant to her life. He would hardly have anticipated Flora finding herself under this necessity.

A chill stole around her heart.

She would try not to think on that; only of the immediate deed before her.



ENTERING THE KITCHENS, Flora was taken aback at the heat coming from the ovens and the great fire, but the warmth was welcome. Overnight, the temperature had dropped, first sending snow, then thickening the ice upon Loch Balmore, so that all were speculating on it being strong enough for curling. The dreich weather of the past month had been replaced by blue skies and a frost that made one's chest ache.

Ragnall, she was told, was particularly good at the game, always sending his stones true, to meet their mark.

Flora had used to enjoy the game herself, having been taught by her father, but she'd no time to think of frivolity. If she had her way, the laird of Balmore would never again have the chance to prove his prowess with a curling stone.

The hearth here was bigger even than theirs at Dunrannoch, with six smaller pots hanging on arms around the central cauldron, and the room was full of bustle. The demands of preparing the feast had everyone lending a hand.

Nevertheless, the cook, Mistress McTavish, gave her a merry smile as she approached with that morning's milk. "Here be, lass. Come and give the clootie dumpling a stir." She beckoned to Flora. "'Tis the best luck when all do take a hand. Six times one way, then six t'other."

Setting down the pails, Flora wiped her hands on her apron and gave a small smile of her own. If Mistress McTavish did but know Flora's mind, she wouldn't be so warm in her welcome, but her simple kindness touched Flora's heart. She'd naught to complain of under Ragnall's roof, receiving nothing but fair treatment.

Taking the spoon with both hands, Flora wielded her might to stir the heavy mixture of suet and dried fruit and flour. Wrapped in a cloth and placed in boiling water, the pudding had been one of her father's favourites.

A hard lump came to Flora's throat but she refused to give in to self-pity.

"Ye be stronger than ye look." The cook gave her a nudge. "And a pretty one besides. Ye ken the master be askin' after ye? I'll warrant ye'll nae be in yer own bed this night, nor any through Hogmany, if ye've a likin' tae his company."

Mention of Ragnall's philandering ways stirred the flame of anger in her again, but Flora made herself answer meekly. "If the master wills it, I suppose I cannae disagree."

Mistress McTavish blew out her cheeks. "Well, I ne'er did hear of any lass thinkin' twice about flichterin' into his chamber. Were it summer, he'd have had ye on the moor in the gloaming if ye was willin', but 'tis a mite oorlich for that. Still, I'd say ye've already sampled a wee smourich."

"Aye." A passing lad winked at Flora, blowing his own kiss. "An' the laird'll be givin' ye more than a coorie." Passing his arms around his chest, he acted out a playful cuddle. "If he's nae tae yer likin', come and find me, lass. I'll keep ye roastit."

"Away wi' ye, afore I gie ye a skelpit lug!" The cook clipped the boy's ear and shook her head, laughing. "Pay nae notice tae the cheeky eejit. 'Tis the laird as wants ye."

Taking up her knife, she continued preparing the rabbits laid out on the table. "If ye'll help us a while wi' the neeps an' tatties, 'twill be welcome, but 'tis best ye help serve in the hall tonight." She looked disapprovingly at the scarf about Flora's head. "The laird will be wantin' ye tae serve him particular, so ye'd best do away wi' that bit o'clock. From the little I can see of yer hair, 'tis a fine colour, and worth admirin'. Whit's fur ye'll nae go by ye."

It was clear that Mistress McTavish had a soft spot for the laird. In fact, Flora hadn't heard an ill word of him from anyone, but taking the girls on the moor in the gloaming! She knew that Highland men had a deal of passion and would take whatever comforts a girl was willing to give, but the laird ought to set a better example.

I'll be serving him, alright—but with more on his platter than haggis and stovies, thought Flora, taking a knife to the pile of waiting turnips.



BY THE TIME the clootie dumpling was cooked, Flora had taken out most of her ire on the vegetables. The past years had taught her what it was to work but, still, she felt weary on her feet. Having hardly slept probably didn't help.

"Ye've earned a rest, lass." Mistress McTavish placed a hand on her shoulder and passed Flora a slice of clootie. "This here be from the smaller pudding I made yesterday. Take ye into ma cubby and lay down yer head on the cot for a while. The master will expect ye fresh and lively, so we cannae be having ye swooning on yer feet." She looked thoughtful a moment. "If ye find yerself ponderin' and worryin', there's a wee bottle o' spirit on the shelf there. 'Tis useful, sometimes, for putting aside whatever be making ye anxious—only be careful tae take but a drop. Any more and ye might nae wake up again!"

Wearily, Flora nodded. All afternoon, the knowledge of what she must do had eaten at her, and the situation had hardly been helped by listening to the chatter of the servants—all about how kindly Ragnall was, and how good at settling the disputes of the clan.

Little did they know what sort of man he really was.

Doing as Mistress McTavish directed, Flora went through to the small room off the kitchen, which the cook had made cozy for herself.

Seeing the bottle of malt, Flora took it down. Her father had always advised against strong drink, saying it turned a man to the devil. If she remembered rightly, Calder's father had fallen out with him over that very thing, having a liking for whisky himself. Her father had said it was what killed him—too much of the drink.

I wonder...

Unstoppering the bottle, Flora gave it a wary sniff.

How much did a person have to consume before they 'didn't wake up' as Mistress McTavish put it?

Back in the kitchen, one of Ragnall's men had come down for a jug of ale, a bannock and some cheese, to take up to the laird's chambers. Resting before his guests arrived for the evening's festivities, Ragnall wouldn't be expecting her but it surely wouldn't be too difficult to gain entry.

He might be cross, of course, that she hadn't come when he'd first asked her, and she'd have to make herself amenable, to throw him off the scent—but if she could get him to drink the malt, he might fall unconscious long enough to allow her to do what she must.

The question was how to do so, and what amount would be enough. Although it was a time of feasting and merriment, she didn't have the impression that Ragnall would willingly drink himself to a stupor in the middle of the afternoon.

Perhaps, she might take him the clootie dumpling and douse it in the whisky. Would that hide the taste sufficiently? Tipping up the bottle, Flora let the liquid dribble over the heavy suet. The smell made her nose wrinkle but she added some more. The fruit dumpling did seem to have a remarkable capacity to absorb the malt.

She peered down the neck. The bottle had been nearly full and now looked to contain less than half what it had. Enough surely?

Replacing it on the shelf, Flora smoothed down her skirts and unwrapped the cloth from her hair. As Mistress McTavish said, if she wanted to win his attention, she'd be better off letting him see her long braid. The quicker she was in Ragnall's chamber and getting him to eat the clootie, the sooner all this would be over.

Chapter 7

Afternoon, Christmas Eve

RAGNALL SWALLOWED the last of the ale and tossed the final morsel of bannock to Murdo. Looking at the bed again, he felt the same disappointment that had been nagging at him through the dark hours. The lass hadn't visited him as he'd hoped. In fact, he'd ended up tossing and turning, half-expectant and then more than a little frustrated, when he should have been sleeping.

Of course, there were any number of others he might invite in her stead, but the lure of sampling one lass after another had long since worn thin.

He hadn't invited the milkmaid to his bed lightly.

Something about her refused to give him peace. Her stubbornness, perhaps; that determined set to the chin that reminded him of his own defiant nature.

And it was strange how much she looked like the young bride who still haunted his thoughts—that sad-looking girl who'd run away rather than marry him.

Not that he held himself responsible for her death. Malcolm, after all, had come to him, bartering for the betrothal. He doubted even her father had realized the extent of her aversion, or what it might lead to.

Someone had killed Malcolm Dalreagh that night. Perhaps it had been Flora and perhaps it hadn't. Fleeing the scene had made it look bad for her, but Ragnall wasn't so sure she was the culprit. Anger could make a person act against their usual nature, but had that pale-faced virgin been capable of murder?

But, if it hadn't been Flora, then who?

Someone disgruntled that Ragnall had snatched the prize and all

that came with it? He had a few hunches but with no evidence to act upon and no trace of the murder weapon, he'd been reluctant to throw accusations.

The best way had been to keep things quiet.

Fortunately, the first on the scene had been Malcolm's elderly servant and he'd had the wisdom to come straight to Ragnall. The old retainer, though adamant that she couldnae have committed the act, had agreed that Flora would be likely to take the blame.

From there, the decision had been simple enough. Ragnall's men had seen to the body, and no-one had been the wiser.

The story put about was that the chieftain had passed in his sleep, content in the knowledge that the clan was in good hands. Only Calder had begun asking awkward questions and, though Ragnall had no love for the man, he'd agreed to let him steward the castle in return for his discretion.

Since then, Ragnall had done all he could to drive that night from his mind, including his sadness over the loss of young Flora. Perhaps only the angels would ever truly know what had happened to her, but the note she'd left had convinced him that she'd nae wish to be found. The winter had been a bitter one. If she'd headed towards the mountains, as she said, there could be no doubt that she'd perish.

He'd become adept, over the years, at pushing down memories too unsettling to live with. Better to pretend some things had never happened.

There were certain events though, that could ne'er be forgot.

What had happened to his mother, for one.

He'd been but a child, and had only heard from others the punishment exacted upon her and her lover, but no one deserved the treatment those two had endured. He'd never been able to forgive his father for making her suffer as she had, nor for the knowledge that, had Broderick been a different sort of husband, his mother might never have strayed.

One thing it had taught him was that there was no point putting a woman in your bed unless she wanted to be there and, once you were wed, it was a man's duty to ensure his bride was content.

Ragnall sighed as a knock came at his door. He'd asked only for an hour to himself and had been thinking it would do no harm to lay down his head for a while, but he could hardly do so if his word was

needed on some matter.

To his surprise, however, it was the lass, Florrie, who entered, looking just as delectable as she had the day before, and with her hair uncovered, the fiery tresses contained within a thick braid. Ragnall was assailed by an image of her writhing naked beneath him, her hair loose, spread silken over pale flesh, a rosy nipple peeking between flame-hued curls.

Damnation!

That way of thinking was what had kept him awake all night!

Either the lass was willing or she wasn't.

At least, this time, she didn't look as if she were about to faint with fright. There was a far more resolute air about her—the sort that spoke of a woman who'd made up her mind about something.

Perhaps the day was looking up after all.



“CLOOTIE FOR YE, MA LORD.” Dipping a curtsy, Flora drew back the cloth from the plate she was carrying. “’Tis nae the main pudding, as ye’ll be cutting in the hall, but the cook thought ye might like a sample, and there’s a wee drop of something on top—for the Yuletide, as is traditional.” Flora gave him a beaming smile. “Ye’ll taste it, I hope, and I can let Mistress McTavish know how ye enjoyed it.”

“Aye, lass, if ye’ll partake with me.” The laird leaned down to scratch Murdo beneath the chin. “Have a seat, and let’s look tae the new year together, with a bite o’ the pudding tae bring good luck.”

Flora’s eyes strayed to the wolfhound, staring at its master with nothing short of adoration. “Och, I couldnae.” She set the plate down beside Ragnall. “’Tis too rich for me. I much prefer a spot o’ porridge.” The last thing she wanted was to end up inebriated herself.

Though she doubted Ragnall was fiendish enough to lift a woman’s skirts when she was under the influence of drink, falling unconscious in the laird’s chamber wouldn’t suit her purpose at all. She needed her wits about her for what she was planning.

Ragnall frowned. “Ne’ertheless, I’d count it an honour if ye’d sit with me a while. I’ve nae doubt they’ve been working ye hard in the kitchens. Ye deserve a rest. Pull up the stool and tell me about yer croft and yer family. What will they be doing this night? A game of

horseshoes or skittles, or do they like ‘hoodman’s blind’?”

Ragnall broke off a piece of cloutie but, no sooner had he placed it in his mouth, he took to coughing. “My, Mistress McTavish was full-handed with her bottle!” With watering eyes, he swallowed the morsel. “I ken she saves the malt for special occasions, so ’twas exceeding generous of her tae douse the pudding.”

Flora nodded. She could smell the fumes from where she was sitting and those alone were making her light-headed.

Clearing his throat, the laird continued making conversation. “Come the spring, ye might invite yer family tae pay a visit to the castle, seeing as they’ve nae been before. ’Tis always a pleasure tae meet those who reside on Dalreagh lands.”

“’Tis most kindly, ma lord.”

“In ma father’s time, he paid little attention tae those on the outskirts o’ the moor but I wish tae remedy that. Everyone is important, and should be made tae feel so.”

Flora bit at her lip. Her father had often said the same, although he tended to keep his invitations to clan members alone.

Ragnall brought the plate closer. “The malt is rather strong, but I’ve nae wish to offend Mistress McTavish.”

He eyed the pudding from several angles and a pang of regret twitched inside Flora’s chest. What would it do to him? She’d seen men vomit from taking too much ale, and clutch their stomachs with terrible pains. What, then, would be the effect of so much whisky?

On the spur of the moment, she flung her arm forward, dashing the plate to the floor. The pudding tumbled off, landing directly at the feet of the wolfhound, who eyed it as if hardly able to believe what the heavens had seen fit to gift.

“Nay!” Flora sprung up, snatching the pudding from imminent jaws. Looking about, she could see only one course of action. Though many of the openings in the castle walls were narrow slits, allowing their archers to defend as necessary, the one in the laird’s chamber was larger and panelled with several small pieces of glass. Lifting the latch, Flora tossed out the pudding, then swiftly shut it again before the flurrying snow could gain entry.

Murdo cast up reproachful eyes and collapsed dolefully by the hearth, uttering a heartfelt sigh. Ragnall, meanwhile, surveyed her as if she’d turned raving.

“Mistress McTavish has so many dishes she wants ye tae sample at the feast; ’twould be a shame tae spoil yer appetite by eating all that heavy pudding.” Flora did her best to summon a degree of nonchalance. “And, o’course, the clootie is nae for dogs. We wouldnae want Murdo tae be unwell.”

Ragnall looked at the hound, then back to Flora. “Well, it seems neither of us has further need for worry—though whoever finds the remains o’ the pudding is unlikely tae employ the same abstinence. We can only pray they survive the ordeal.”

Flora grasped the edge of the window, feeling rather nauseous herself. She hoped the birds would fare alright when they descended on the crumbs.

Rising from his chair, the laird’s expression turned to concern. “Are ye sure ye be feeling well, Florrie?” He felt her forehead, then moved his fingers to her wrist, as if to gauge her pulse.

“Aye, perfectly well.”

Pushing up her sleeve, his touch was light upon the sensitive skin. “Ye must know, lass, that I’ve a strong desire to take ye to ma bed, and not just for a single night. O’ course, I promise to see ye properly wed when the time comes for us to part.”

Flora gritted her teeth. “’Tis exceedingly considerate of ye, I’m sure.”

“And I’ve guessed, too, sweet Florrie, that ye be pure.”

“Och, aye. I’m pure in every deed, if not always in thought.” Flora managed a half-smile.

His lips grazed the side of her neck and she shivered. “Do nae fret, lass. I ken the ways of readying a woman for a man, so ye’ll be eager to receive all I have for ye.”

The way he was kissing beneath her ear made her doubt it not. As it was, her knees were threatening to forget what they were made for. However, the fact that he was adept in the ways of seduction did not change the essentials of what she intended to do.

“Once I have ye naked, Florrie, there will be nae barrier tae ma claiming every part of ye.” He trailed his mouth lower, his hands grasping her at the hips and pulling her into the warmth of his body.

Knowing that he’d said those same words to countless other women, she ought to have felt repelled, but some part of her was curious. If Ragnall Dalreagh was the lover he proclaimed himself to

be, let him prove it to her.

She was afraid of many things, but she wouldn't allow herself to fear this. It was only a human act, and one she would have submitted to as his wife. Ragnall had robbed her of much, but she would take this from him.

Tipping back her head, she let his mouth journey the length of her neck to the base of her throat. As if sensing her surrender, Ragnall lifted her into his arms, his eyes upon hers all the while. Glittering dark, they spoke of the passion he intended to share with her. Within a few strides, he reached the bed, covering her with his body as he laid her down, and Flora felt a momentary panic.

This was the moment. She would become what God and her father had intended and, when it was over, she would break the Commandments, committing the worst of sins.

He was looking at her intently, as if as unsure as Flora of where he might begin, but then his mouth met hers in a kiss deep and tender and she was lost within it, at once light as air yet more aware of her body than she'd ever been before. She was alive to the strength of his arms and the press of his hips and, when he broke off the kiss, she gasped, breathless.

He murmured endearments as he pushed her gown from her shoulders, grazing his cheek over the tender skin of her collarbone, to the upper curve of her breasts. The tip of his tongue glided over her nipple before taking it into his mouth, consuming her whole. A jolt of need, intense and undeniable, clenched inside her, shocking in its ferocity.

It didn't matter that she hated him.

She was wicked, but a thrill of excitement rocked her as he brought his hand up her calf and thigh until he found the wetness between her legs. When he dipped a finger there, stroking where she was velvet soft, she wanted to cry and whimper and beat him with her fists. But she clenched them instead, and her teeth—willing herself not to make any sound that would show him how much she needed him to continue touching her, just as he was doing.

And all the while, he suckled her nipple. With his face buried there, at least he couldn't see whatever was in her eyes. She didn't want him to see it—that terrible, hot need that made her want both to scream at him and to wrap her legs tight, drawing him deeper. She

wanted to know how it might have been, if she'd ever had a wedding night.

"Ye be sure now?" Ragnall's voice was ragged as he lifted his head, his eyes dark with longing. He pushed his hips forward and, though he was still fully clothed, she felt the hard ridge pressing against her, and the slow throb of her own desire, telling her what she needed from him.

Flora wetted her lips. "Aye. Whatever happens, 'tis of ma own choosing."

It seemed all he needed to hear. Leaning back to rest on his knees, he pulled his shirt hastily over his head, revealing to her the muscular, battle-scarred torso that her hands longed to touch.

"I want tae bury myself in ye, lass, tae drive into ye hard, but I promise tae curb ma savage need, for I shall nae forget ye are a virgin, and I willnae hurt ye."

Breathless, Flora nodded her assent.

However, before he could tug aside his kilt, there came a sharp rap at the door. Ragnall hesitated, looking down at Flora, laid half-naked beneath him. The knock came harder the second time. "Laird? Ye have someone wantin' an audience wi' ye afore the feast begins."

"Damn the bollocks off him, can the man nae wait a while?"

Flora pulled up the hem of her shift a little, so that her leg might rub against Ragnall's great hairy thigh. His attention was immediately drawn back and he pushed the shift up further still, baring the dampened auburn curls to his hungry gaze.

"Tell them I've ma own feastin' tae attend tae right here afore I go down, and I've an appetite as won't be sated quickly." Though he was obviously annoyed, he gave Flora a wink.

"But 'tis Calder o' Castle Dunrannoch, and he insists he mun speak wi' ye."

Hearing Calder's name, Flora's breath seized in her chest.

He was at Balmore?

But, of course, he was. All who held rank would be coming to pledge fealty and join in the festivities leading up to Hogmany itself.

She could only speculate as to what was so urgent that he wished to consult the chieftain of the clan, summoning him from his chamber.

He hadn't discovered she was here, surely? No. It was impossible. Even Ragnall didn't know who she was—and none at Balmore saw

Maggie for anything other than a simple maid. There was nothing to betray them.

“Shall I tell the bampot tae go chew his walloper, or will ye humour him?”

“He can gae boil his head.” Ragnall hollered back. Running his hands over Flora’s hips, he drew the shift up, over her head and away altogether, so that she lay truly naked beneath him.

“He’s sayin’ he’ll come up, unless ye appear the noo.” The voice beyond the door sounded decidedly unsure of itself.

“Hell and damnation!” Ragnall bent to rest his head on Flora’s stomach. “Ye see how it is, Florrie? Nae peace!”

“Tis alright.” Flora made herself answer steadily. The last thing she needed was for Calder to burst in. Though Ragnall hadn’t recognized her, she’d practically grown up with her step-brother. He’d be less easily fooled.

“Go ye down. I’ll wait here, warming the bed.” She gave him a tentative smile.

Ragnall sighed and nodded. “Bank up the fire, lass, and I’ll have them send some fare, and a new gown. There’ll be nae more milking o’ the coos while I’ve need o’ ye.”

Making himself decent, he raked his hand through his hair. “Tis nae the most comfortable thing, to walk from ye when I’ve a broadsword fully drawn beneath ma kilt, but I’ll nae be away long.” Placing a final kiss upon her lips, he left at last.

Flora fell back upon the pillows.

God help her!

Another few moments and she’d have been thoroughly taken!

A strange heat was flowing through her, emanating from deep in her belly. Her breasts, grazed from Ragnall’s stubbled beard, felt bereft for the want of attention now he was gone.

God help her indeed.

She could feel the warmth and weight of him above her, and she had need of him to return—to finish what he’d started. Only then would she kill him.

Scooting off the bed, she wrapped the quilt around her and made her way to Ragnall’s writing desk. The upper drawer was locked but the second one down opened to reveal several sheets of parchment, a quill and a bottle of ink.

Hastily, she laid all out on the desk, dipping the quill. There was no time to take the care Father Gregory had drilled into her, but the note was only for herself: a distillation of her promise, to remind herself of what she must do.

By the fading afternoon light, she formed the words.

I, Flora Dalreagh, avow to avenge my father's untimely death—by blade or poison, strangulation or drowning. By whatever means presents itself. I shall be watchful for the time and, no matter how soft my heart grows, I shall not relent in fulfilling my duty.

There!

It was written and she wouldnae shirk her vow; nae matter that the day of their Lord's birth was near upon them.

Looking among her cast off clothing, she recovered the dirk from her pocket, the blade still stained with her father's blood. Directing the point to her thumb, she pricked a bead of her own blood to join it, then pressed her thumb beside her written oath.

Above all else, and no matter what happened, she would remember why she was here.

Chapter 8

Very late, Christmas Eve

HOW MANY HOURS HAD PASSED?

She'd eaten the trencher of stew. With it had come a soft woollen gown in red, and a woven belt, now laid upon the chest at the foot of the bed. Flora wished not to think of whom might have worn it before, or where it had come from.

As Dalreagh's true bride, she would have received an ample wardrobe as part of her dowry.

Flora again paced the floor, pausing at the window to look across the courtyard. Clansmen had been arriving steadily for the evening's feast, their horses led to the stables. All the day, the castle's servants had been busy preparing beds and lighting fires. Like the others, Maggie would be run off her feet.

Ragnall must have become caught up in welcoming the arrivals, for whatever Calder had wished to discuss wouldn't have taken so long—and Ragnall had certainly appeared eager to return. Nevertheless, a tendril of fear wove within her. What had Calder told the laird?

Tempting as it was to put on the garment, if she were to venture downstairs, it would be safer to do so in her simple tunic. She would draw less attention that way.

To wear the crimson gown would be to declare herself in a manner that could lead to difficult questions. Better to slip among the guests unnoticed. Still, she looked longingly at the soft fabric. Had she claimed her rightful place, as chatelaine of the household, she would have welcomed Balmore's guests by Ragnall's side, and would have received every courtesy. In her guise as Florrie McKintoch, she counted for nothing, and was expected to be grateful for the favours

shown to her by the laird; grateful, too, that he would find her a husband when he'd tired of her himself.

Such was a woman's lot!

The very thought made her blood boil.

She wasn't supposed to have desires and thoughts and opinions of her own, but she had them aplenty—and the will to act!

Having braided her hair, she put on her old clothes and pulled the square of fabric from her pocket, securing it tight around her head.

The dirk she secreted beneath the pillow. Once she'd returned, to await Ragnall once more, it would be there for her, easily to hand.

And the vow she'd written?

Knowing she'd written the words lent them power and she would need every bit of strength to make good on her promise, but she couldn't risk the paper being found. She cast her eyes about the room. There must be some place she could hide the parchment—just for a while. Once her deed was done, she'd burn it.

Returning to the desk, she dropped to her knees, looking beneath. A crevice in the wall would do. It need only be wide enough to take the folded paper. In the shadows, it would not be seen.

Running her hands over the stone, Flora found what she sought and concealed the parchment. Her vow was part of the room now; part of the castle walls. When the time came, she would remind herself of that.



FOLLOWING the passageway leading to the kitchens and the rear of the hall, the sound of laughter and merriment grew as Flora drew closer.

“Florrie!”

She whirled about at the calling of her name, to see Maggie behind. Setting down her pitcher, her friend clasped Flora in a swift embrace.

“Where have ye been?” Maggie kept her voice hushed. “I was lookin’ all about for ye.”

“In the laird’s chamber—and there’s nae need fer concern.” Flora offered what reassurance she could, knowing how Maggie did worry. “I was there of ma own will, and naught happened tae concern ye.”

Maggie's brow rose. "That's as may be, but I wished tae find ye for ma own reasons." She drew Flora further into the shadows. "'Tis the arrival of Calder that has me anxious."

Flora nodded, urging her friend to go on.

"I brought in the clootie for the laird tae carve and 'twas then Calder laid eyes on me. I tried tae keep out o' sight, but Mistress McTavish insisted I come out again tae serve the ale and he grabbed me about the wrist." Maggie bit at her lip. "He remembered me bein' yer maid, and wanted me tae tell him o' that night o' yer father's death—about what happened tae ye, wandering off in the night, and if I had ought tae do wi' it."

"What did ye say?" Flora swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I said 'twas a dreadful shock tae me tae find ye gone and the laird dead, and that I left the castle myself on the morn, wishin' tae have nae more tae do with Dunrannoch."

"Did he believe ye, do ye think?"

Maggie shook her head. "I'd say he was suspicious. He looked about the hall keenly, as if tae spot ye."

Flora's mind jumped from one possibility to another. The matter on which Calder wished to speak with Ragnall had likely naught to do with her, but if he thought she might be here, who knew what he'd suggest.

The two were seated together at the high table. If she got close enough, she might be able to overhear their conversation.

"Give me the jug of ale, Maggie."

"Nay! I will nae!" Maggie shook her head vehemently. "If ye be thinking o' going near Calder, 'twill be a mistake. The man is nae tae be trusted."

"I'll be careful, I promise."

Reluctantly, Maggie handed her the pitcher and, with eyes lowered meekly, Flora entered the clamour of the hall.



"I'VE TOLD YE, Calder, I've nae wish tae relinquish control of any part o' Dalreagh lands." Ragnall drank to the bottom of his cup and pushed it aside. "'Twas the old chieftain's desire that the two branches be brought together again, tae lend strength tae the clan. If we cannae

hold what's ours, some other will take it from us. 'Twould be madness tae divide what now stands united."

"'Tis all well for ye, Ragnall, being chosen tae lead the clan." Calder gave a discontented grunt. "But, ye ken ma vexation. For years, Malcolm told me he'd pass the lairdship o' Dunrannoch tae ma hands, along wi' the safekeeping o' his daughter. I'd hae been satisfied wi' that. Instead, I've naught but the stewardship o' the castle—and that by yer favour alone."

Ragnall pushed aside his trencher. "The responsibilities o' the laird are nae tae be taken lightly. All depend on ma will: generations of families, bairns and elders. 'Tis a duty I intend tae uphold until ma dying breath."

Calder mumbled something.

"If ye've aught else tae say, I'd rather hear it tae ma face!" Ragnall folded his arms, taking on a sterner tone. "If that's the sum of it, I'll be taking ma leave of ye."

"Nay! Calm yerself. Ye and I shouldnae fall out." Calder clapped Ragnall upon the back. "Though I ken why ye be wantin' tae retire early. I hear ye have a new bit o' skirt waitin'."

"Ye hear that do ye."

Standing three steps behind, Flora's ears pricked up.

"Aye, and a pretty red-haired lass, too. When ye've had enough o' her, ye can mebbe pass her along ma way." Calder gave a lascivious grin. "Some recompense, ye might call it, for the lass as was promised me afore ye laid claim tae her."

Ragnall narrowed his eyes. "'Tis nae ma intention tae be done wi' her anytime soon, so I advise ye tae cast yer net elsewhere."

On quiet feet, Flora crept a little closer.

"As ye like it." Calder shrugged. "'Tis yer prerogative as laird and chieftain. First pick o' the juiciest. Just have a care who ye take under yer roof."

"And what are ye meaning by that?" As Ragnall leaned forward, Flora ducked in to refill his cup, stepping back again before either man had time to notice her.

Without glancing her way, Calder held his own aloft, inviting her to pour from her jug. "Only that I see ye have Flora Dalreagh's former maid serving. Wi' the events of a certain night remaining dubious—" Calder touched the side of his nose, "I'm surprised ye be willing tae

have her wandering about. For all ye know, 'twas her and that 'butter-wouldn't-melt' lass as sent the old man tae the other side. The pair scooted away afore dawn, after all."

Flora's blood froze in her veins. Little chance, then, of persuading Calder to support her claim to innocence.

She expected Ragnall to agree with the foul insinuation, for the diversion of suspicion could only aid him. Instead, his voice turned menacing. "'Tis in the past, and that's where it stays. Only God and Malcolm Dalreagh know the truth and whoe'er it was who sent him tae his maker, they'll make their own reckoning on Judgement Day."

Calder raised his hands in resignation. "We'll say nae more. Only keep yer eye on that lass, Maggie. If she's nae hiding something, I'll eat ma own sporrان!"

As Calder inclined his head, indicating Maggie on the far side of the room, Ragnall looked away briefly and, in that same moment, Flora saw Calder drop something from his hand into the laird's drinking vessel.

By the time Ragnall looked back again, Calder had raised his cup.

"A toast." Calder looked at the laird over the rim. "Tae long life and true friendship."

Unsuspectingly, Ragnall picked up the ale and brought it to his lips.

If Calder were to poison the man she believed killed her father, what did that matter? Surely, he'd be doing her a favour, doing the deed she'd been so far unable to do herself? But something was amiss, and it felt wrong to stand by.

On the instant, she lunged forward, knocking the cup from the laird's hand and sending the ale full over his tunic. Cursing, he leapt up and, as he turned to berate her clumsiness, met Flora's eye.

Chapter 9

“THERE’S nae need tae drag me!” Flora attempted to free her arm as Ragnall steered her up the stairs.

“If ye were obedient, I’d have nae need tae take ye back tae the chamber at all. Ye would be waiting there for me instead o’ sneaking out tae where ye shouldnae be.”

“Aye! Waitin’ for as long as pleased ye!” Flora couldn’t help but show her ire. “And kept there until ye be done wi’ me!”

Ragnall spun her about, pressing her to the wall and looming above her. “That wasnae for ye tae hear. Other men will lust after ye, as ye must ken. I chose ma words tae warn off Calder, using language he’d understand. As I said afore, I’ve nae wish tae hold ye tae anything against yer will.”

As a servant in the castle, she had no real power to defy the wishes of the laird. That he insisted otherwise continued to confound her. The only woman who might be assured of holding her body sacred was one promised to the church, serving as Christ’s bride. That privilege was not Flora’s, though she’d oft wondered if she might throw herself on the convent’s mercy.

The truth of it was, from the moment of their handfasting, she’d belonged to Ragnall, even if he’d never consummated the union.

Grasping her wrist, Ragnall led her upward, then along the dark passageway, back to his own chamber, closing the door firmly behind them before uttering more.

At last, he let go. “Explain yerself. Ye were eavesdropping, and I dinnae believe ye tipped the cup by accident.”

Scowling, Flora took herself closer to the fire and pulled off her headscarf.

Why had she intervened? Calder’s intent was malevolent, she was sure—but what had inspired her to save Ragnall from whatever

mischievous her step-brother planned?

That, she couldn't say, but there would be little point airing her suspicions of Calder to the laird. He would only think her a trouble-maker and that would do no good in furthering her aim.

Setting her chin, she resolved to play the character he seemed so ready to believe her to be. "I was bored, waiting for ye." Reaching behind, she untied her apron, then sat down to ease off her slippers. "And it vexed me tae see ye found the company of yer clansmen more enticing than returning tae ma side."

Ragnall's lips twitched. "Then we'll waste nae more time. Ye may be a disobedient wench, but I'm yer master—in this chamber more than anywhere else—and I'll see ye take off that serving gown, tae wear the finery as was sent."

The way he spoke wakened her old feeling of ire but, deep in her belly, the strange ache took hold again. He wished to be her master, but she'd have him serve her nonetheless. Let him press upon her again, and touch her. Let him stroke and smooth and caress.

When all was done, she would reach for the dirk beneath the pillow. Tugging the tunic over her head, she cast it to the floor. Standing in only her shift, she ran her fingers through her braid to loosen it, letting the long skein of auburn tumble wanton over her shoulder. "Ye aren't ma master in everything. I have the free will God gave me."

"Is that so?" There was an unmistakable glint in his eye, and her stomach fluttered in response. Ragnall snatched up the scarlet gown, clearly intent on forcing it upon her.

Sudden boldness roaring through her veins, Flora dropped the shift from her shoulders. Standing bare, she planted her hands upon her hips.

Ragnall stopped in his tracks, just as she'd guessed he would. His gaze fell to her breasts, to the curve of her hip and then the crux of her legs, his eyes turning several shades darker.

Flora hardly had time to think before he'd thrown aside the gown and was lifting her. In four strides, he'd tossed her upon the bed.

"I'm going to show ye who yer master is." Kneeling above her, his words were full of command but he spoke with a soft huskiness, running his hands the length of her inner thigh. Flora was obliged to bite back her moan, fighting an urge to lift her hips as he stroked his

thumbs either side of her sex. Absurdly, she clasped her hands across her bosom, suddenly feeling very much at a disadvantage.

He gave a knowing smile and, with great gentleness, parted her. Looking at the softest place inside, his voice was little above a murmur. "I'll give ye more pleasure than ye can imagine, little dairymaid, and I won't stop until ye buck under me. Ye'll tremble and quiver, and plead for me tae give ye more—and I want tae hear every sound."

Flora said nothing, but the slick place between her legs clenched in response, as if it understood better than she what was about to happen.

Bending, Ragnall worked his hands beneath her bottom then lowered to kiss her curls. Flora writhed but Ragnall only held her more firmly, keeping her where he wished with two strong hands.

She felt the stubble of his chin and the warmth of his breath as his tongue found the seam of her sex and glided upwards.

What was he doing?

He'd touched her inside before, but his tongue was altogether different.

She closed her eyes. It was mortifying but she would endure it. Let him think she'd surrendered.

He held her firm upon his mouth and, inside, a deep pull took hold, responding to the pressure of his tongue's long strokes. She tried to hold back, to stifle the sounds she made, but it was futile. Whatever this was, Flora wanted more.

She'd been gripping the quilt but her fingers suddenly found their way into his hair and she wasn't pushing him away. She hated him, but something was rippling through her, like the wind pushing hard across the loch, stirring up the waters and making everything bend to its will. A roaring need rushed through her, dark and hot, and she arched against his mouth, climbing higher.

He gave a low groan, his voice coaxing. "That be it, lass. Let it take ye."



HER CHEST ROSE and fell with each breath as she lay back on the coverlet, her limbs relaxed at last. It had given him more satisfaction

than he'd anticipated, seeing her quiver under his touch.

Despite her maiden state, she was a feisty one—throwing off her clothing to stand bare before him, goading him into bedding her without delay.

And she was more than ready for what he intended, thanks to the honey he'd brought forth. Damn good she'd tasted too. If he'd carried on, he'd little doubt she'd have swiftly reached her climax again, but he was no saint; the time had come to explore her with more than his fingers and tongue. He'd have no rest until there was a true union.

It had been a while since he'd wanted any lass this badly, and the throb in his groin had given him the devil's own job to hold himself back, but he'd promised that the coupling would be mutually pleasurable, and it was a matter of honour to keep to his word.

God help him, he'd have to fight the urge to bury himself in her, or to toss her over and take her from behind, easing between her thighs.

And though part of him wanted her to know that she was helpless to all he desired, he wanted her to submit willingly—to desire him in the same way he did her. He couldn't promise that she wouldn't be sore in the morning, but he hoped she'd have some warm memories of his lovemaking to temper the discomfort.

Rising, he stood beside the bed. "Ye want me, lass?" He was aware of the raggedness in his voice. If she said no, he didn't know what he'd do.

Although she didn't speak, she gave a nod.

It was all he needed.

Unclasping his kilt, he set about joining her in the naked state. If they were to do this properly, he wanted to feel each womanly curve against his skin—to wrap her around him and, with any luck, encourage the lass into exploring the taste and feel of his own flesh.

As he stripped off the last of his clothes, it pleased him to see her cast her eyes over what would soon be hers.



DEAR FATHER IN HEAVEN, the size of him!

Having seen him in his bath, she knew, of course, but when he threw off his kilt, a surge of panic came over her.

She hardly had a moment before he was atop, taking his weight on

his arms but making her very much aware of his warmth, and the hairiness of his body, and the hard muscles. As he passed his hands gently over her shoulders and breasts, she was reminded of how the laird stroked that wolfhound of his, and how it looked at him adoringly when he did. Even now, it lay by the hearth, having followed on its master's heels.

His caress came to rest on the indentation of Flora's waist and she shivered beneath him, despite the fiery heat emanating from his warrior body. Every part of her had become aware of every inch of him. Even her lashes were aquiver, touched as they were by his half-kisses—ranging from her brows to the lids of her eyes.

"Ye trust me, lass?" He murmured softly, though his rigidity was already nestled where she was wet. "Kiss me, Florrie, and put yer legs about me. That's the way tae take me full inside." He rubbed his nose to the tip of her own, then brought his lips to meet hers.

His hands were guiding her to where he wanted, and she allowed him, letting his body sink further between her thighs. "Ye be soft and sweet, lass, and the man in me hungers tae take ye swift, but I'll take every care." His arousal was nudging at her and, though she did naught, her sex softened and parted for him. He entered her with a low groan and the shock of it made Flora cry out.

Ragnall held still, though he remained embedded within her. "'Tis only a short discomfort." A sheen of perspiration stood on his forehead. "Slow and steady is the way; ye'll soon see that having me inside ye is a pleasure." As he spoke, he withdrew, then eased forward, his jaw clenching all the while.

It was impossibly tight and he was impossibly large. If he chose to move more quickly, or to thrust harder, she would certainly be hurt.

"Ye were made for me, Florrie." Ragnall spoke breathlessly, working his length inside, finding a smoother rhythm—and her legs were doing just as he'd asked, twining about his, like ivy around oak.

She gasped as his next thrust penetrated further than the others, and he gave a corresponding moan.

Still, she thought, *I can't. I can't.*

But her body had other ideas.

He was kissing her again, his mouth drawing out a raw wildness she hadn't known was there, making her want to open to him.

Making her want to have him within, his weight pressing and his

hands securing her against his thrusts.

The discomfort was different now. No longer a stabbing pain but an ache, echoing that which usually rested about her heart, never letting her forget what had been taken from her.

But she wanted to be only here, letting this strange need overtake her.

Ragnall was looking at her, his gaze deeply blue, penetrating her as fiercely as his body. He held still a moment.

“’Tis better, lass?” Bringing one of his hands from beneath her, he brushed the hair from her cheek, then palmed her breast, grazing his thumb, warm, across her nipple, his touch feather-light. She couldn’t help but whimper.

Don’t stop.

She rocked against him, and it was sweetly, maddeningly wonderful.

She wanted him. Even if he hurt her, she wanted to feel the length of his body, red-blooded and hard. She wanted to know all that he might do to her; to know his strength and his size.

She pushed her hips upward and arched her back, wanting his hand fully upon her breast; wanting him to pinch where he teased, to touch her more forcefully.

Wanting everything.

Her muscles clenched about him and Ragnall groaned, louder this time. “Lass, ye dinnae ken what ye do tae me.” He began moving again and she clung to him as his thrusts grew swifter.

She feared she’d been wrong in what she’d wished for. Ragnall seemed beyond the control he’d first exerted, his eyes heavy with lustful need, but something drew her upon the same shameless wave, making her score her nails upon his back—as much to hurt him as to urge him on.

He threw back his head when the spasm overtook him and pulsed inside, spilling his seed deep.



A GENTLE SNORE from the other side of the bed told her Ragnall Dalreagh was no longer awake.

She’d done exactly as she’d planned, using his desire to place

herself in his bed—and here he was, asleep beside her and vulnerable to the dirk resting beneath her pillow.

Turning on his side, the laird tucked her against his chest. His leg alongside hers, pinning her just as surely as the arm flung across her body.

Even in sleep, he was strong, but she could still reach the blade. She had only to slide it free and push it into his neck. He wouldn't know what was happening until too late.

Ragnall shifted again, nestling his chin in the nook of her neck and sighing.

Trying to ignore the sound of his breathing, and the warmth of his hand resting upon her belly, Flora steeled herself to act.

Now that it came to it, the deed filled her with dread—not least because of the intimacy she and he had shared.

She'd known all along, hadn't she, that it would be difficult.

It was murder.

A grievous sin.

And committed in these Yule days, honouring the Lord's birth.

She'd knelt in the chapel with the other servants of the castle the morning before, like a true Christian, and all the while plotting an act that might send her soul to the devil.

Did God forgive such things?

Many a man killed in the name of honour, protecting his people and his lands.

Many killed for revenge as well.

But what of killing he whom all the clan called chieftain?

The man who should call her wife and to whom she'd given herself, as she would have done on their true wedding night?

The man who might have planted a babe in her belly?

The thought stopped her cold. If she were with child, could she live with herself knowing she was the killer of the innocent's father? Since running away, turning her back on all that might have been, she'd denied any thought of motherhood. Such a path was not for her; not now.

It couldn't be.

But, the thought nagged at her.

What would be the fate of this babe, if it were ever born?

A father slain and a mother condemned for murder?

Worse than her own childhood, mourning her mother's death.

Not that all bedding made a child. In five years, she'd been the only offspring of her parents—and not all pregnancies were successful. During her father's marriage to Calder's mother, there had been seven conceptions that she knew of. Only two had carried to term and neither child had survived the night.

Still, she needed to have a care. Would Mistress McTavish know the herbs one took when a babe was unwanted, or Maggie perhaps?

Flora bit hard at her lip. The likelihood was that there was no child but, even if there were, she knew her conscience would never allow her to do such a thing.

To kill the man who'd murdered her father was one thing.

To end the life of an innocent was another.

'Twas bad enough that she must kill Ragnall—and after having lain with him in the act that made her his. After all, the physical bond between man and wife was as strong as any oath of fealty.

She was about to break the vows she'd sworn during the handfasting, and there would be no going back.

Flora squeezed her eyes shut and inched her fingers beneath her head. There it was—the cool, smooth handle of the dirk. Gently, slowly, she drew it out and held it fast in her hand.

With him behind her as he was, she wasn't best placed to drive the blade home. Better to sit above him and locate the vein. She'd no wish to be cruel.

Though his ambition had led him to do away with her father, he seemed a good man in other respects; the sort her father would have approved of to succeed him.

One plunge of the knife was best, to avoid his struggle.

Ragnall's breathing remained heavy, close to her ear. If she moved too much, too quickly, she risked waking him.

Supporting his shoulder with her other hand, she maneuvered herself away.

How deeply he was sleeping, and dreaming too, judging by the small sounds he was making.

From across the room, a thin whine carried from where the wolfhound lay. It stirred and stretched, and footsteps padded to the side of the bed. Though the moonlight was dim, Flora saw the smallest glint in the animal's eyes. It rested its chin upon the quilt—surveying

its master, and she who shared his bed.

Don't look at me like that! Yer master must pay for what he's done; no matter that ye love him.

Turning her back on the hound, she rested upon her elbow, holding the blade to Ragnall's neck, the point directed at the thick vein. One sharp push and it would be done, straight through to the hilt.

May God in Heaven forgive me. Flora sucked in her breath.

Her hand was shaking and her vision blurred.

Tears! No! There would be no tears!

The villain had shed none for her father, and she would waste none upon him.

But, from behind, the wolfhound whined again and scrabbled his paws at Flora's back.

With a shuddering sigh, she loosened her grip upon the dagger, drawing back the tip.

She couldn't do it!

Ragnall Dalreagh deserved to die, but it wouldn't be at her hand. Somewhere along the way, what had seemed straightforward had ceased to be so.

It was over.

She would leave Castle Balmore and attempt to find her peace elsewhere. The nuns at Inverness would take her in, perhaps.

Though she was cowardly and ashamed by her lack of resolution, there was solace in knowing that her soul would be in no danger. She might perform penance for the wickedness she'd already perpetrated.

It ought to have brought relief, but a terrible hollowness rushed in to fill the place where her hatred had been—the fire that had burned within her these two years.

Though 'twas foolish, a powerful yearning came upon her to touch his cheek. The laird had brought her to his bed for one reason alone. Tender feelings had no place here—yet they crept around her heart and held it captive.

A single tear welled and ran down her nose.

If only Ragnall had been patient, waiting for his leadership of the clan. He might have made a worthy husband. A man she could have loved. The man who would have fathered her children.

Now, all was in ruin, for though she was too weak to avenge her

father, she had resolution enough to know that she couldn't remain under Ragnall's roof.

Leaving was the only answer.

With the back of her hand, she pushed the tear away.

The next moment, her wrist was wrenched back and the dirk fell from her grip. The laird, his eyes awake and blazing dark, loomed above her, pinning her to the bed with his weight, and the dagger pricked Flora's throat.

Chapter 10

Near dawn, December 25

“YE MEAN TAE MURDER ME?” The voice that had been husky with desire was now cold as the ice upon the loch, and the dirk Flora had secreted was held to her own throat. “There be many who might wish me dead, but what have I done tae offend ye, a simple dairy maid?”

Flora dared not move, for the sharp point of the dagger touched the very place she’d intended as her own mark. Ragnall need only increase his pressure a wee bit more and her blood would paint the blade.

“Do ye nae recognize me?” Though she trembled inside, she met his fierce gaze. “’Tis I, the daughter o’ the man ye killed heartlessly, though he trusted ye with all he held dear.”

Shock passed over his features, with disbelief hard on its heels, anger following close behind. For the merest moment, Flora felt the dirk press harder to her skin and she gave a strangled cry, but the pressure eased almost immediately.

“If I wished tae silence ye, ma bare hands about yer throat would be sufficient, but I’m nae murderer o’ women, nae matter what ye believe.” He tossed the dirk hard away, so that it skittered across the floor.

“The lass betrothed tae me is dead these two winters long and the truth o’ her father’s death along with her.” He fingered her hair, regret creasing his brow, but his voice remained hard. “Ye have the look of her, I admit, but ’tis impossible that ye be her. The lass was nae more than a child when she was bound tae me, and with a mouse-like way about her. She wouldnae have survived without the comforts she’d been raised with.”

“Think ye so little o’ the Dalreagh blood?” Flora’s anger flared. “A

child I was, but not without friends, and I've had two long years tae become the woman ye see now. I steeled myself tae avenge ma father's murder, vowing tae have satisfaction with the same blade as killed him. Look if ye dinnae trust me. The carving on the hilt will prove ma tale, and ma own claim tae the name Flora Dalreagh. Ma disguise was a simple one, but good enough tae fool ye."

Ragnall drew back a little, clearly unsure of his conviction, and Flora felt the cool air pass between them. They were both naked still, and Ragnall's thigh lay between hers. His hand rested upon her shoulder—the same hand that had cradled her throughout their lovemaking.

He seemed to consider all she'd said and a flicker of something like respect entered his eyes. "If it be ye, Flora, I dinnae ken what to believe. Ye appeared a devoted daughter but people do terrible things in sudden anger, and a betrothal is not always of a woman's choosing." A sorrowful look overtook him. "I deterred the men from searching, saying that I wouldnae risk them tae the mountains' winter and, when there was nae sighting nor word of ye, I believed ye dead, as everyone did. I told them if ye were guilty, ye had paid yer due."

"Kill ma father?" Flora pushed against his chest, attempting to put more space between them. "'Tis a neat tale tae direct the blame at me, when the sin lies on yer own head. Ye be both cunning and clever, I admit, Ragnall, but there be no honour in ye! Only cruel ambition, and ye should be ashamed."

She bit back a whimper against his hurting fingers upon her shoulder.

"Perhaps ye speak true of yer innocence, but ye have bold-faced cheek tae act the blameless maid when I wake tae find ye with a blade at ma neck. Dinnae avow tae be incapable o' murder when ye were about tae cast me tae ma maker!"

Flora gave an exasperated cry. "Would that I were capable! Ye would be lying insensible at this moment, yer lifeblood atoning for that taken. 'Tis ma own lack of courage that leaves ye alive. I've betrayed ma father's memory in failing tae dispatch ye, and that shortcoming I'll carry with me tae ma dying day."

To her vexation, her eyes were filled again with tears. So much had been lost, and with what purpose? Only so that Ragnall could impatiently claim his place as head of the clan.

But her weeping appeared to cause no softening of the laird's heart. Rising from the bed, he donned his shirt and lit the lamp, retrieving the dagger from where it lay.

Turning it in his hand, he inspected the carving. There could be no mistaking the dirk passed from chieftain to chieftain, bearing the symbols of the Dalreagh clan: a proud stag and an eagle with outstretched wings. Of course, some would say that only her father's murderer would have had the chance to steal the dirk from him.

Looking up, Ragnall's eyes held hers for several heartbeats.

Would he kill her now?

If he were the murderer she believed him to be, he would hardly want her spreading her story about the castle.

When he spoke it was with a determined air. "Did it nae occur to ye that yer father chose me as his successor because he trusted me? The clan needs strong leadership. If ye had killed me, ye would have plunged the Dalreaghs into turmoil." Laying aside the dirk, he took up his kilt and began to wrap it about him.

"If ye be innocent o' the death of yer father, I ken yer desire for revenge, and it does ye credit, though 'tis doubtful ye would have escaped as successfully as before. Ma men would have stopped at nothing until ye were found."

Flora sighed wearily.

"Ye cannae understand." She pushed her tears away. Hadn't she learnt long ago that they served no purpose? "Wrongs should be put right. I came tae yer bed with intent tae avenge my father's murder. For that alone, I suffered ye tae touch me." She rubbed her fingers over the quilt, not wishing to meet Ragnall's eye, for her words were not entirely truthful.

The laird didn't need to hear how much pleasure his caresses had given her. It was humiliating enough for her to admit to herself. His lovemaking had stirred her in ways she didn't comprehend. Even now, were the dirk to be placed in her hand and Ragnall to lie defenceless, she would be unable to take the revenge she'd sought.

Fastening the kilt, Ragnall placed the dagger within his belt. Again, he surveyed her, as if deciding upon his course of action, and there appeared a shadow over him as he moved closer.

He spoke softly this time. "The birds upon that coverlet were stitched by ma mother's hand. Like many a maid, she had nae say in

the betrothal made for her, and her marriage tae ma father was nae a happy one.”

Ragnall paused, clearing his throat, while Flora looked at the embroidery under her fingers.

“I was too young tae understand, but I'd find her with eyes red-rimmed often enough, and ma father didnae care who heard the violence he rained upon her.”

Ragnall hesitated again and Flora found him gazing at her with a pensive expression. Truly, he was a man of swiftly changing moods.

“Alasdair, ma brother, kept me away from it as much as he could, but 'twas like a darkness over the castle, and over everyone in it.”

Alasdair.

From the break in Ragnall's voice, it was clear that speaking of him caused a degree of pain. Surely then, the riding accident had been just that. Looking at the man before her now, she could hardly believe he'd connived to bring about his brother's death.

“Ye've heard the tales, no doubt, of what happened after.” Ragnall came to seat himself upon the corner of the bed.

Flora gave a small nod, though only snatches of the story had reached her ears. Her husband being unable to give her the affection she sought, Vanora had taken a lover, but the inevitable day had come when the two had been discovered. The punishment meted out upon the pair had been barbaric—that Flora knew, although the details had never been spoken of in her hearing. Even Maggie had refused to tell her.

“I've drawn swords more than once with men who dared throw the story in ma face.” Ragnall levelled his gaze at Flora. “But I speak of it now tae show ye that I do understand yer desire to avenge the father ye loved. I spent ma youth contriving plots to do away wi' the man who subjected ma mother tae that cruel death.”

“And why did ye nae act?” Flora could hardly hide her surprise.

“'Twas Alasdair who persuaded me against it.” Ragnall's face softened when he spoke his brother's name. “He told me we had the good o' the clan tae consider; that there was enough conflict between the clans without causing factions within. 'Twould have been Alasdair as took ma father's place as laird, and he was content to wait.”

Flora had only the dimmest memories of the elder of her second cousins. A serious demeanor, she recalled. He would have made a wise

chieftain by the sound of him, though perhaps he lacked the spirit of Ragnall, who seemed to draw others more forcefully.

Pulling his boots toward him, Ragnall began lacing them to his legs. "Tis not a part of ma history I take pleasure in telling, lass, but I do so tae show ye that I understand the fire in yer belly. Perhaps ye killed yer father, or perhaps not—but, either way, I understand what would have motivated ye tae do so. I've nae doubt that ma mother rued the day her own sire betrothed her tae Broderick, and doomed her tae a marriage that brought nothing but tears."

Flora frowned. "Some of what ye say makes sense, and ma heart goes out tae yer poor mother and all she endured, but why do ye pursue such a line o' reasoning when ye must know I'm blameless in ma father's death. 'Tis ma desire tae avenge him that brought me here, believing ye murdered him."

Standing, the laird regarded her with compassion but the underlying flint in his eyes remained.

"So ye say—or, perhaps yer mind is so full o' resentment ye cannae judge where tae spend yer ire. Either way, I cannae let ye have the freedom o' the castle, knowing the anger that directs yer mind. I need time tae think on what should be done. Until then, ye mun stay locked here."

Flora clutched the quilt within her fist as she watched Ragnall leave, and listened to the key turning heavily in the lock. She was to be kept here, then, until he decided her punishment.

Reaching her hand across the bed, she felt the warmth where his body had lain, and a chill passed over her.

He seemed convinced that it had been she who killed her father.

That being so, had she been wrong in her own assumption?

She sank her head into her hands, and her heart filled with dread.

If Ragnall had not murdered his chieftain, then who had—and with what purpose?

Chapter 11

THE PASSING HOURS brought a tumult of emotions, but Flora was certain now of one thing. Her convictions had been wrong concerning Ragnall. Had he been her father's murderer, he would have had no compunction in turning the dagger to Flora's own neck, dispatching her before she had a chance to tell her story elsewhere.

Instead, his eyes had told her that he felt only pity; that, and a strange sort of empathy. It seemed impossible then, that he carried the burden of a murderer's guilt.

She would tell him so—that she'd been wrong—and do all she could to convince him of her own innocence. Together, they'd discover who was truly responsible. As chieftain, Ragnall would have the authority to bring the evil-hearted villain to justice. She believed in his sense of honour to do so, even were it to cause trouble within the clan.

With alacrity, she washed at the small basin, wincing only a little at the tenderness between her legs. True to his word, Ragnall had been gentle with her, and it had been she, rather, who had urged him on. To think that she'd been fearful, in those hours afterward, that he might have rendered her with child.

Now, the notion brought with it altogether different feelings.

Their vows had been made before God and bound by the fastening of hands.

They'd lost so much time, but she would make up for it now. She would be the wife he deserved, and embrace Ragnall as her husband, as her father had intended. In this, at least, she could make amends.

Having donned the red woollen gown, she dressed her hair and made herself presentable. She had faith that he would see the truth.

Then, he would want to bring her to the great hall, wouldn't he? To present her to their clansmen. He'd explain everything, and they

would understand. He'd make them believe in her innocence, and all would be well. He was the chieftain, and well-respected. None would question his wisdom.

She had only to retell the details of that night, and he would see the honesty of her words.

She wouldnae allow herself to believe anything else.

When the door opened at last, Flora's heart leapt and she rose immediately to her feet. How she longed to throw her arms about her husband's neck and meet his eager kisses with her own.

Only when he stepped into the room with Calder at his side did her joy die in her breast, for Ragnall appeared to have aged since she saw him last.

"Aye, 'tis the lass." Calder stepped boldly towards her, an unpleasant smile upon his lips. "Her father nae suspected he nursed a viper, but I saw it from the start—that she were a serpent in the guise of a maid, more concerned with her own vain wishes than her duty tae the clan. 'Twas a relief, I tell ye, when the early promise of us being joined as man and wife was broken."

He shook his head woefully. "I was nae alone in hearing her arguing with Malcolm in his chamber the very evening of his death, but I didnae guess she'd go so far as tae murder him. The bloodied garments were found in her room on the morn, and the wench fled, as ye ken."

For several moments, Flora was too horrified to speak but then a wave of fury broke over her. "Lies! I never spoke against ma father's wish. I was all a dutiful daughter should be. I accepted every decision he made, even when the choices were nae ma own." She cast her eyes to Ragnall, beseeching him to speak on her behalf, but saw only bleak acceptance.

How could it be so?

The laird was no fool. Why would he believe Calder's accusations?

"Ye see how she is!" Calder folded his arms. "From her own lips, she admits the betrothal was against her wish—and didnae the wench write the same on the note she left in her chamber, sayin' she wouldnae take ye to husband? She didnae want ye Ragnall, any more than she wanted me."

An evil glint lit Calder's eyes. "I guess ye've bedded her, but did ye have the chance to inspect her body by good light? It wouldnae

surprise me to find she bore some devil's mark. I hear the witches dunnae like to take mortal men to husband, having enough demons visit them by night to satisfy even the most wanton lusts."

The gasp of horror died in Flora's throat as she saw Ragnall look not at her but to the morning sun filling the window.

He wouldn't countenance such vile accusations. She wouldn't believe it.

"Nae doubt she came tae ye posing as an innocent and seduced ye with sweet promises," Calder continued. "But I see now she wears the fine scarlet o' a woman confident in her charms. Had ye come tae yer chamber alone, I'll vouch she would hae had those skirts thrown up for ye in a trice. Such is the way with women who ken how tae twist a man tae the coil o' their finger."

Flora felt the heat rush to her cheeks. Would that be what Ragnall saw when he looked at her now—a conniving woman who'd played his passions all along? It shamed her to think that he wouldn't be far wrong.

"I see it pains ye tae know ye were deceived, but ye need trouble yerself nae longer, Ragnall. If 'twere left tae me, I'd have the wanton hung for her sins, but I'll honour yer wishes as head o' the clan. As we agreed, I'll see tae her detainment at Castle Dunrannoch. She'll nae more be a danger tae God-fearing men." Calder cast a swift glance at his chieftain and, seeing him distracted, sent Flora a leer of triumph. "I'll make it ma concern tae see she thinks long and hard on her wickedness, living out her days in penance."

Flora clutched at her throat. "But ye cannae! Ragnall is ma wedded husband. Only he has authority over me."

Rushing to the laird's side, she took his hand in hers and brought it to her breast. "Look to yer heart, husband. Ye ken I'm a good woman and true."

Ragnall granted her the courtesy of meeting her eyes but his own had undergone a transformation, filled with an abyss of hollow pain. She barely recognized the man who had jested with her, who had confronted her with his own anger, and had bedded her with such passion.

"The betrothal will be annulled." Calder declared. "Father Gregory will agree when he hears the truth o' the witch's unholy crimes. Nae man should remain wed tae such a vixen, least of all the chieftain

beloved o' clan Dalreagh. There be plenty of virtuous women our laird may choose in place o' this foul wench. Ma own sisters, Sorch'a and Hilda, be coming of age for making obedient wives. Come the new year, I'll send both tae Castle Balmore for ye to know better, Ragnall. I've nae doubt ye'll find one tae yer liking, and the handfasting may take place as soon as ye be ready."

"Nay!" Flora dropped to her knees, pressing her head to Ragnall's thigh. "Dinnae send me away."

"Tae yer feet, wench." Calder's rough hand pulled her to her feet again. "Be grateful ye're spared a trial before the clansmen and the baring of yer body for the search o' witch-marks. Even where a body appears pure, they be sometimes found in the intimate parts—and the searching must be thorough."

"Enough!" Ragnall spoke at last, his tone tinged weary. "Ye torment the girl for nae good reason, Calder. For all the evidence ye put forward regarding the night of Malcolm's death, I cannae be certain she wielded the dirk. Return her tae her home, and treat her with the care due the former chieftain's daughter, but confine her tae her former chambers at Dunrannoch until I've thought further on the matter."

He looked imploringly at Flora. "I want tae believe ye be innocent."

"Husband." Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Haud yer weesht, woman." Calder's grip on her arm was firm. "The laird has spoken and 'tis nae fer ye tae argue."

Ragnall. Don't abandon me! Can ye not see that I care for ye?

But the laird did not look back as Calder took Flora away.



DAYLIGHT HAD BLED to darkness as the granite walls of Castle Dunrannoch loomed, and the moon had risen to the first portion of the sky, casting its glow through the swirling snow.

With her wrists tied, Flora rode astride in front of Calder, obliged to endure the pressing of his body to hers and his fingers touching her. At first, he'd only grasped her hip beneath her cloak, digging into the tender flesh, but he'd soon had the courage to grope at her breasts, all the while breathing hot in her ear. The fine wool of the gown offered

little protection from his cruel tweaks and pinches, and he cared not that the chill air invaded her body as freely as his impudent hands.

'Twas Cristemass Day—when Christian souls reflected on the miracle of the Lord's birth, remembering the holy family gathered about the cradle of the infant who would change the world. A time of hope in the bleakest of times. Yet Flora had never felt more alone.

As each mile of frosted landscape passed, Flora made herself withdraw within, to the heart of herself. There could be little doubt as to the treatment she would receive under Calder's protection, but she refused to react to any torment he might devise. Let him use her if he would, but he wouldnae have the satisfaction of hearing her beg or show sign of distress.

In so many ways, she'd failed her father and betrayed the name of Dalreagh with her foolishness, for she'd directed her vengeful eye upon the wrong man entirely, and wasted these years in hiding while the real culprit sat in leisure within the walls of her former home.

How had she been so blind?

She saw now that Calder's resentment of the broken betrothal had fed his hateful nature. Had he planned to accuse Ragnall of the murder? Only her own actions had altered that path, for she'd made herself the most likely candidate by fleeing the castle.

Calder had bided his time, but she doubted not that he intended ill against his chieftain. Had she not seen him tip something into Ragnall's drink? Were it not for her interference, he might have been dead already.

Icy threads wove about her at the thought, more chilling than the night air—for Calder would try again, she was certain, and assert himself as Ragnall's rightful successor.

As the heavy iron gates of Dunrannoch rose on their chains, Flora cast a final glance upon the moor, knowing that she might never see it again. Though 'twas a barren place, the trees stark twisted and spiked with ice beneath the shadow of the mountains, its harsh beauty was as much a part of her as the castle itself.

More than ever, she was aware of all she had lost. Her home, where once she'd been happy, and beloved, was now her prison, and who knew what awaited her.

She feared the worst, for Calder had no honour in him. With her marriage to Ragnall annulled, he might subdue the gossip and refute

the accusations others would make, taking her to wife himself—but she doubted he needed her bloodline to reinforce his position.

More likely, he'd shame her publicly when he no longer feared Ragnall's intervention. Once the laird had taken one of Calder's sisters to wife, he would surely give her no more thought, and her fate would be of no consequence to him.

Flora foresaw only one end and, while she hoped her suffering would not be prolonged, her instinct told her that Calder would keep her for as long as it amused him to make her suffer.

Her only solace was the chance she might have to bring her retribution on her father's true murderer. Let Calder think her cowed, weak and broken—but she would strike the final blow, and end the torture that had dogged her.

These might be her final days, but she would draw her last breath knowing that justice had been done.

Chapter 12

Castle Balmore Afternoon, December 31

RAGNALL STARED into the bottom of his empty cup then back through the ice-crusted window. The castle was filled with sounds of merrymaking but he hadnae the will to join in wholehearted. A new year was upon them, but the darkness of the past seemed to wrap all the tighter about him.

Even the loyal affection of Murdo failed to comfort him, though the hound had followed its master closely these days past, placing its head upon his lap whene'er the silence of his melancholy grew too great.

From the first moment he'd laid eyes on the fiery-headed maid, he'd felt a portion of the burden lift from his shoulders, as if her vitality had the power to cast away some of the painful memories he carried.

Perhaps, some part of him had known it was her, Flora, all along, but he'd been unwilling to accept what his bones told him. He'd chosen to love her in the only way he knew—with his body rather than his heart. A paltry sort of love, but he wasnae capable of more. He'd been flint-hardened too many years.

Now, what had he done?

Though Calder was kin, he didnae trust the man—and the venom he'd lashed upon Flora was outlandish. Whatever her sins, she was young—more maid than woman, no matter the feminine curves that fitted his hands and the passion that burned in her blood.

He'd thought he wouldnae be able to make a judgement with a clear head while she resided under his roof but allowing Calder to remove Flora had been a mistake. The same night, he'd regretted the

decision and made to saddle his horse, but the storm had been already raging, angry sleet driving cruel across the moor, and he'd known it would be foolhardy to send his horse into the gale.

Nor could he travel alone.

To risk his own life was one thing, but he couldnae place other men's in jeopardy to remedy his error.

Now, the storm was easing but 'twas Hogmany night—and he could hardly drag his kinsmen into the winter's cold when their only wish was to unite in celebration. Come first light, he would order the horses readied and douse the men in cold water himself if necessary, to fetch Flora back to the safety of Balmore.

He knew not, as yet, what decision he must make, but he would gather evidence and question witnesses himself, rather than rely on Calder's doubtful oversight. His prayer carried, he hoped, to a merciful God, who would guide him in finding Flora as innocent as she proclaimed.

Meantime, he should join the feasting below. No matter the lowness of his spirits, a chieftain was needed among his men, and Hogmany night was rich in custom to welcome in good omens for the new year.

Every doorway might be overhung with rowan and hazel to ward off evil, and the broom have swept ill luck out the door, but Ragnall knew the fortunes of the clan relied on leadership rather than ritual.

A soft knock came at the door and Ragnall bid enter the serving maid he'd summoned earlier to bring more ale. Perhaps he'd take just one more cup before donning the face he must wear as chieftain of the Dalreaghs.

He recognized her at once. "Maggie, is it not?"

The woman had entered the castle at Flora's side.

A confidant?

If anyone knew what had happened that night, perhaps 'twould be she.

Bobbing a curtsy, the maid set down the pitcher and turned nervous eyes on her laird. "I've been wanting to confide in ye, ma lord."

"Aye." Ragnall indicated for her to sit. "And I should hae brought ye here afore now, tae speak for yer mistress."

The woman twisted her apron back and forth. "I cannae vouch for

ma Flora's motives in making herself intimate with ye, laird..." The subject clearly caused her some embarrassment. "And I own it was foolish o' her tae come here at all. I didnae want us tae do so, but Flora was set upon it."

Ragnall felt the tension as his jaw clenched. "Ignorant of yer mistress's intent ye might have been, but ye surely know what transpired on this night two winters before?"

The woman was trembling. "As to that, with the Lord as ma witness, I cannae say." The quiver in her lip betrayed the closeness of her tears. "But I've known Flora since she was a bairn, and I'd give oath on ma life that she'd ne'er have raised a hand tae harm her father. She came tae me in the darkest hours with the horrors upon her, telling o' finding him murdered in his bed, and I ne'er for a moment doubted the honesty of it."

Ragnall frowned. He'd seen enough lies in his time to know when a person was being truthful, and Maggie's demeanour told him she believed all she said.

But, their actions still didnae make sense to him.

"Why did ye flee the castle, if neither of ye were tae blame for the laird's death? Ye must have foreseen it would go against ye. Only those who are guilty run in shame—and yer mistress had promised herself tae me as wife but hours before. Did it count for nothing with her?"

"Oh, ma laird!"

Here was the crying that had threatened to come. Maggie buried her face in her apron and shook her head. "I hardly like tae say, but Flora was convinced the killing was at yer hand. I dinnae ken why the notion took her so, but she was convinced ye were impatient for the power the chieftaincy would bring. She swore devoutly that she'd ne'er live as yer wife, knowing ye were the one as did the murder o' her dear father. She was ready tae leave the castle with nae a soul to protect her, so I hadnae a choice but tae go wi' her. We took shelter wi' ma brother, on his croft, and Flora did her best tae learn the farming ways—though she ne'er did quite get comfortable with the milking."

The milking?

The remembrance of his flame-haired beauty bent beneath the udder of the cow rushed in to make Ragnall smile, but the moment

was fleeting.

From the first, she'd contrived to deceive him.

As to the purpose, he wanted badly to believe the maid's story but, it was just possible, she was as fooled in the ways of Flora Dalreagh as he had been himself.

"Calm yerself. I may wish tae speak wi' ye again, but 'twill be all for now. I was over hasty in sending yer mistress away, but I'll have her back tae Balmore soon, and answering a great many questions. I'll get tae the truth of it, nae doubt."

Maggie threw herself down and kissed Ragnall's hand. "Oh! I thank ye for it, Laird Dalreagh—for I'm afeared for her safety at Dunrannoch. 'Tis nae ma place tae blacken the name of yer kinsman but I dinnae believe she'll receive fair treatment under him. Since the betrothal was broken, I saw he harboured ill-will towards the mistress, and he's a man tae long hold a grudge, I'd say." She dabbed at her eyes with the apron. "I havenae slept for worryin'."

Ragnall's frown returned. With every word Maggie spoke, his own fears were compounded.

"Leave me now, for I've much tae think on." Ragnall raised her up again. "Be about yer business and say nae a word tae anyone. I mun deal with this myself."

With another curtsy, the maid departed and Ragnall turned to his faithful wolfhound with a sigh.

Aye, he would get to the bottom of the matter, and do all he could to keep Flora safe, whatever the outcome.

He would begin by making note of all the maid had told him. Drawing the chair from his desk, he took up his quill and paper and began to write. To his chagrin, a draught blew the parchment to the floor before he'd reached the second line, leaving a trail of ink across the desk.

Cursing, he bent to retrieve it and there, beneath the table, something caught his eye.

What was that, pushed within the stones?

With nimble fingers, he retrieved it.

A piece of his own parchment, and scrawled in a less than fair hand, but legible nonetheless.

He read the words:

I, Flora Dalreagh, avow to avenge my father's untimely death—by blade or poison, strangulation or drowning. By whatever means presents itself. I shall be watchful for the time and, no matter how soft my heart grows, I shall not relent in fulfilling my duty.

Dear God!

'Twas a guide to murder one might say!

Though the tone was naive, the burning intent behind the words was apparent. Flora had written the vow in this very room, most likely—and he'd been the target of her ire. Fortunate for him that her 'soft heart' had apparently won out.

Her soft heart.

His own felt a pulse of warmth in response.

And the vow itself? Here was the proof at last of her innocence, in her own hand—for no one could believe her guilty of her father's murder when she'd written so convincingly of her desire to avenge him.

What a fool he'd been!

At this moment, who knew what danger she was in—for if Flora had not killed Malcolm Dalreagh, he could guess at who the real culprit was. The suspicions he'd pushed aside could no longer be ignored, and Flora's placement in Castle Dunrannoch placed her in mortal danger.

He'd been deceived alright, but nae by the wench who'd crept into his heart.

There was no time for delay, no matter the weather or the amount of ale running through the veins of his men.

The Hogmany feast would be moving to Dunrannoch and, if Calder had harmed Flora in any way, 'twould not be only a hog's head on the table.

Reaching for his sword and scabbard, Ragnall prepared himself. He was ready to fight—not merely for justice but for the woman who deserved to be at his side.

Chapter 13

Castle Dunrannoch *Hogmany Night, December 31*

HER HANDS WERE near numb from the cord with which they'd been bound these past nights, but Flora tried to keep her mind focused. The knots had defied the tugging of her teeth but, even had she loosened them, the room remained stoutly locked and guarded, and the window gave a sheer drop to the courtyard below.

So far, only her courses had kept her from violent ravishment. In the meantime, Calder had subjected her to countless humiliations.

From the first, he'd shown he meant to use physical strength—not merely to assuage his desire for her body, but to dominate and abuse. Ripping her bodice, he'd bared her, squeezing and pinching, his eyes blazing with vicious delight and taunting all the while: that he'd bring his men to take their turn until she confessed her guilt, or parade her before having her burnt as a witch. Worst of all, that he'd keep her locked away forever more, and there would be no end to the torments he would inflict.

When he'd thrown up her skirts and pushed his fingers roughly between her legs, she'd taken her mind to another place—to the heathered moor, and the breeze whispering gentle.

She hadn't known herself to be bleeding until he'd withdrawn his hand, demonstrating his revulsion with a hard slap to her face.

The tenderness along her cheek and through the brow of her eye told her she bore a heavy bruise, but the ache of that mark was nothing compared to the soreness about her heart.

No one was coming to her rescue.

For a brief moment, she'd allowed herself to believe Ragnall might care for her, but there was no substance behind what they'd shared.

He'd made that clear when he'd sent her away.

She was alone, but she was the daughter of Malcolm Dalreagh, and great-granddaughter of the mighty Camdyn, who first made Dunrannoch his fortress home. She would take her revenge rightfully—against the true perpetrator of her father's murder.

That thought sustained her.

'Twas Hogmany night, and all the castle would be celebrating, but the piper's midnight lament would signal to her only the ending of all that had passed. There would be no new beginnings.

She'd achieve one honourable act before her own demise, giving her life as had her fellow clansmen on the battlefield.

Hearing the key turn in the lock, Flora's pulse lurched and sped. Calder had allowed no other to enter since bringing her to the castle under cloak of darkness and she had no illusion as to the purpose of this visit.

She was clean enough now that Calder would have no compunction against taking what he wished.

Curling against the smooth wood of the bedstead, she made herself as small as she was able. Let him think her daunted. Her time would come to show him what she was made of.

Closing the door behind him, Calder lurched on unsteady feet. Certainly, the drink had already been flowing freely. A flare of hope rose in Flora's breast.

Without ado, he lifted his kilt, clutching his cock and baws. "Wha's it tae be then, wench. Ye want tae suck them first, afore I spear ye?" He laughed coarsely. "Show me ye like the savour o' this fat haggis an' tatties an I'll see ye sent a tray of something for yer belly when we're done."

Flora could hardly hide her scowl. Calder must be drunk if he dared suggest placing his manhood anywhere near her teeth. Docile as she'd made herself appear, she doubted he trusted her that far.

In point of fact, it looked too flaccid to perform any sexual act but that wouldn't stop him from attempting something unpleasant, she was sure.

Her distaste must have shown upon her face, for his slightly jovial mood quickly vanished. Throwing down his tartan, he growled menacingly at Flora.

"Ma cock nae good enough for ye? 'Twas ample, according tae yer

father, until that bastard Ragnall took everything that should hae been mine!”

Balling his fists, he took a step closer. “Git yerself turned over, then, if ye nae want tae look at what’s coming for ye.” Grabbing Flora’s left foot, he yanked it sharply, causing her to cry out. Having her at the edge of the bed, he shoved her over, so that her face pressed to the coverlet. With her hands still bound, her arms were uncomfortably stretched. Moreover, she hadn’t a chance of reaching the dagger Calder kept sheathed on his belt.

“Untie me, please.” She attempted to make her voice sweeter. “Twill be easier tae move me as ye wish if I’m nae restricted by the rope.”

“Untie ye?” Calder gave another boorish chuckle. “Why would I do such a thing? I’ll manage right enough, dinnae worry.”

Raising her skirts, he gave her bare backside a hefty smack and laughed nastily. “I’m ready tae claim ma due now ye’re no longer bleeding like a stuck pig. ’Tis a shame I won’t be breakin’ ye as a virgin, thanks tae Ragnall ridin’ ye, but I’ll wager yer other hole is still tight.”

He leaned over, pressing to her back, his rank breath thick in her ear. “Shall I make ye bleed in that place instead? Just remember, wee Flora, ‘twould be Ragnall givin’ ye the same backpassage poke if he hadn’t grown bored wi’ ye so quickly.”

Biting back the tears, Flora tried not to listen. Whatever Ragnall’s faults, he’d never intentionally caused her pain; at least, not in the way Calder planned to, but she could hardly argue at how easily Ragnall had given her up.

She heard Calder spit and a blunt finger jabbed between Flora’s cheeks.

Gasping, she flinched away, but his weight prevented her from escaping and she felt the stirrings of his erection press to her bare skin.



ONLY THE CRASH of the door hitting the wall saved her.

“’Tis our clansmen from Balmore at the gate, with the laird demanding to see ye, Calder, and the Lady Flora.” The guard seemed

little more sober than this master, swaying as he delivered the news.

Cursing, Calder stood, and Flora twisted about. The guard, at least, had the decency to look askance as she shook down her skirts.

“Tell him tae join the feast and I’ll be with him shortly.” Calder glowered. “And get his men tae place their weapons in the keep. ’Tis nae a night for us tae have arms tae hand; nae when the ale is flowing.”

Nodding his assent, the guard exited as swiftly as he’d come.

Calder grimaced, talking more to himself than Flora. “What’s the blaggard want, the noo? No matter, it’ll be me giving him what’s coming.”

With a grunt of irritation, Calder drew out his dirk and cut through the ropes at Flora’s wrists, narrowly avoiding nicking her skin. The relief at being free of the bindings brought a prickle to her eyes as no taunts had been able and she rubbed at her wrists to restore feeling.

Holding the blade before him, Calder threw her a shawl and jerked his head. “Put this aboot ye tae cover the rent in yer bodice. I doubt the laird has come tae do anything other than gloat, but we’ll make ye presentable, shall we, until we see what he’s aboot.” He gave her a hateful grin. “And mind ye nay complain, or I’ll take the cloth from yer back altogether when we return, and ye’ll nae see it again. ’Twill make ye appreciate ma warmth if ye’re obliged tae shiver naked.”

Abhorrence surged through Flora’s veins. The man was distant kin by blood but there was nothing that made him worthy of the Dalreagh name. Her father had been right to sever the betrothal.

Calder was armed and she had nothing but her wits, yet instinct told Flora that she might not have another chance. The chamber pot beneath the bed was still full from yesterday, when Calder had demanded she relieve herself while he watched. Holding it between her legs, he’d laughed as she blushed, and she’d wished then that her hands were free, wanting to hit him over the head with the heavy bowl.

There was nothing to stop her from doing so now. It would only be fitting, since the man was nothing but a turd himself.

With pounding heart, Flora dived to the floor, reaching for the pot, and Calder obligingly took a step closer, bending down to grab her. Flora felt a brief moment of glee as the slops hit him in the face, but she wasted no time in swinging the pot in a calculated arc.

His blasphemous oaths were cut off as the pot connected with his temple.

Though dazed, he still had hold of the dirk and careened towards her, slashing at the air. "Just wait 'til I have hold o' ye, bitch." Calder wiped his sleeve across his face. "I'll cut ye a new gash in yer belly and fuck ye there while ye scream for mercy!"

Picking up her skirts, Flora made a dash for the door, running down the passageway, then taking the stairs two at a time. Her best hope now was to reach the feasting and throw herself on Ragnall's mercy. Better to be imprisoned at Balmore than here.

Calder would nae be able to hide his bitter mood. Ragnall would see the man was unhinged. He might even believe her suspicion that Calder had been the villainous murderer.

However, as she reached the minstrels' gallery, she heard a great commotion from below. Ragnall's men might have laid down their swords but there was a deal of fighting going on. Furniture overturned as men wrestled with one another, but it was clear those loyal to Calder were coming off worst. Amidst the throng, she caught sight of Ragnall and her heart leapt.

Mounting a table, he shouted loud and clear. "Hear me, for I've nae wish tae see the blood of kinsmen spilled."

Though his curls were wilder than ever and his eyes sunken dark, he'd never looked more handsome.

"I hereby take possession o' this castle, and shall treat every man fairly. Calder is nae what ye think him. There shall be a trial, but I believe he murdered Malcolm of Dunrannoch. Lady Flora is innocent of any crime, and is held here against her will. Surrender ma wife and pledge yer fealty, and all shall be well."

At that moment, he looked up, and the face he turned to Flora softened. Whatever anger was there, it fled before the love that shone from his eyes, directed at the woman who was lawfully his.

"Ragnall!" she called to him, feeling as if she were saying his name for the first time. With beating heart, she began to push through the musicians, to reach the staircase on the other side, but had taken barely a step before an arm came about her throat, lifting her from her feet.

The screech died in her throat as she realized the point of a dirk was pressed hard beneath her lower ribs.

“Shut yer harlot face!” hissed Calder. The scent of urine wafted from him. “Ye’re comin’ wi’ me, and ye’ll do it fast, or I’ll cut ye, like I promised. There be plenty o’ rooms wi’ locks upon them, an’ I can cut ye several holes afore any man of Ragnall’s will break down the door.”

Without waiting for reply, he hauled her back the way they’d come, pulling her the length of the passageway and upwards, climbing the tower stairs, barring each door as they progressed higher.

At the top, Calder kicked open the final barrier and an icy blast swept in, bringing with it a whirl of snow. The cold hit Flora like a punch, rendering her breathless as he dragged her outside.

“What are ye doing?” She gasped between the words, the frozen air rending her lungs.

“Surely ye recognize the battlements?” Calder spoke through gritted teeth. “It seems the laird is nae as stupid as he looks, and has come tae reclaim ye after all. I doubt he’ll wish tae listen tae aught I say, but he’ll remember what I do.”

In a single movement, he threw what had previously bound her hands over her head. Flora attempted to twist away but Calder tugged hard. This time, his knot put a noose about her neck and, though she pulled at it with her fingers, there was no loosening the rope.

Calder was surely almost as cold as she, but an unnatural fire seemed to burn in his eyes as he surveyed her and then leaned over the side.

There would be nothing to see. She knew the tower they’d climbed as well as any other part of the castle. It was the twin of the tower that loomed above Balmore, its battlements visible for miles around, rising a hundred feet or more above the courtyard.

Nevertheless, Calder brought her to the edge, inclining her head to make her look as he had done.

“Ye dinnae ken, do ye?” He sneered, tugging at the rope so that it tightened further about her throat. “Ragnall ne’er deserved tae lead the clan. He’s no son of Broderick. With his brother’s death, the lairdship should hae gone tae me, as Connor’s heir. Ragnall is naught but a bastard, as everyone knows.”

Flora managed to shake her head. “’Tis idle prattle.”

“Ye think so?” Calder jeered again. “Only Vanora would know, but ’tis common knowledge Gillivray the falconer began bedding her soon after Alasdair was born. She was a strumpet, and Broderick had nae

softness in his heart when he punished her and her lover both.”

He pulled the noose tighter still and Flora heard herself make a choking sound. Momentarily, the world dimmed.

Nay! I shan't faint! Ragnall is coming. I'm not going to die. We are meant to be. Husband and wife. If she said the words over and over, it would make them true. She just needed to hold on, and to believe.

But Calder was tying a loop in the other end of the rope and throwing it over one of the slimmer pieces of stone. “Ye’re no better, are ye—whoring yerself tae a man who thought ye was a servant? Dinnae tell me ye was behaving as a decent wife should, or I shall let yer guts spill as I send ye over, and the crows shall peck at ye all the sooner.”

A wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm her. He meant to push her over the battlements and leave her hanging there? What barbarity was this?

“’Twill hardly be the same as Broderick’s wrath, but I’m sure ’twill be close enough that Ragnall will ne’er forget.”

Flora could no longer speak but her questioning eyes drew Calder to continue, and he uttered each word with relish.

“Broderick hung them by the feet, letting them swing a full day.” Calder gave a wicked grin. “They were nae naked, but they might as well hae been, for the skirts o’ both were aboot their heads and they were bare beneath. Vanora was free enough with her favours, Broderick reasoned, that she deserved nae modesty in death. ’Twas said they called tae each other until near the end.”

Calder’s mouth twisted again, in a horrible semblance of a smile. “At last, Broderick had them swing the ropes outward, so that the lovers’ skulls cracked on the granite, and they left two streaks of blood that took a whole winter tae wash away.”

Flora squeezed shut her eyes and took her mind away again. She didn’t want to hear any more. The story was too terrible. A story Ragnall had lived with all his life.

She couldn’t begin to imagine the treatment he must have endured from his father, nor the taunts he’d received until he was strong enough to silence them with his fists.

How much resentment had grown within him, knowing his mother’s tragic end? Whatever his feelings over what had happened, ’twould be little wonder if he feared for his own wife’s

trustworthiness.

She swallowed down her shame.

Had she ever behaved in a way that would make him trust her?

Not that it mattered anymore—for she would never see him again. There would never be the chance to let him believe she might truly care.

She felt Calder nudge against her back, and the rush of wind at the embrasure. It would take but one push and she'd be gone.

She ought to send up her prayer, now, before it was too late, but she couldnae frame the words she might speak to the God she hoped soon to meet.

Instead, she saw Ragnall's face and a single thought filled her mind.

I love him.

Chapter 14

Approaching midnight, Hogmany

EVERY PART OF HER ACHED—ESPECIALLY where the rope had rubbed—but Flora gave herself over to the softness of the bed in which she lay, to the comforting warmth of the tender hands on her skin and the familiar musk of the man who whispered low.

“Tell me if anything I do hurts ye, but dinnae move.” Firm, assessing fingers ran over her ribs, then her legs and arms, gently bending each joint. “If ye’ve anything broken, I cannae take the chance o’ making it worse—and ye look as if ye’ve been tae the devil and back.”

When Ragnall reached Flora’s collarbone, she winced. Her neck felt raw where Calder had cruelly wrenched.

“Aye, ’twill be sore, ma poor lass.” The hands moved to cup the back of her head, raising her to take a sip of warm broth. “But, ye’re strong, and will soon heal. Nae more harm shall come tae ye, Flora, for the bastard as did this is answering tae the Almighty for his sins.”

Dead?

The wind had been ferocious on the battlements, and she’d been filled with horror, but she’d been aware of the door breaking and men’s shouts. Something had moved swiftly through the air, thrown at great force, and she’d caught a glimpse of Calder as he went over. His features contorted with fury, he’d scrabbled at the blade in his neck, then reached for her—to save himself or to take her with him she couldn’t say.

His scream had carried away in the gusting storm and with it her world had faded to black. Aware only dimly of being carried, she’d been too numb with shock and cold to feel anything other than the desire to surrender to those strong arms transporting her from the

terror of the night.

She took in the face above hers: the laird of Dalreagh, with his dark curls and piercing blue gaze, and the small cleft in his chin beneath the stubble.

“Aye, ye’ll survive, and thrive, Flora Dalreagh. I promise ye that.” Taking her palm, he brought it to his lips, then to his cheek. As he gave her the faintest of smiles, her heart lurched.

She wanted to press her face to his neck, to inhale his scent and be held close, knowing that she’d ne’er be let go. She yearned for him—this man she’d spent so long running from, whom she’d misunderstood from the first. He’d come to speak for her and to save her, but his sense of honour alone would have guided those actions, regardless of the way she’d treated him.

She needed to tell him how wrong she’d been. That she wanted to make right the wrongs; that she wanted them to try. Would he be able to forgive?

The thought that he might not brought a crushing pain to her chest and no words would come.

Seeing her distress, Ragnall smoothed her hair. “Dinnae speak. Ye’ve suffered badly and need tae rest.”

Yes, she wanted to rest in his embrace. More than that, she wanted to rub the stubble of his jaw and grasp his curls as he kissed her.

But Ragnall only raised the broth again, urging her to take more. “I’ll stay here with ye, nae worry. And, when ye’re ready, ye may decide what it is ye wish.”

What she wished?

She wanted to offer comfort and understanding. To learn the contours of the husband she’d too long denied. To be the wife he deserved. To give her love.

And to receive the same, forever more.

A small crease appeared between his brows as he brought the quilt higher about her shoulders. “I ken ye did as yer father asked when ye spoke the words of betrothal, but I willnae hold ye tae them, if it’s nae yer desire, Flora.” The eyes he turned to her were filled with uncertainty. “If ye prefer tae make Dunrannoch yer home, as mistress o’ the castle, I willnae oblige ye tae return with me. I’ve enough men loyal tae leave a force here, tae protect ye.”

Flora’s chest grew tight. She’d been only a passing fancy and

Ragnall was already planning the next woman to warm his bed.

He looked uncomfortable as he couched his next words. "If ye be amenable, I might visit once a month, until ye bear an heir. Then, I'll leave ye be. Yer life should be yer own, Flora. I shallnae make ye bend tae a path ye never chose."

Amenable?

There was no doubt he was pushing her away, wanting her to remain his wife in name alone—long enough only to give him a son.

"Nay!" Her voice rasped, emerging from the soreness of her throat.

Ragnall drew back at the abruptness of her declaration, shock and disappointment meeting in his expression. "Nay? Ye dinnae wish me tae see ye again?" He looked almost sheepish. "Me and thee havenae gotten off tae the start I would hae hoped for, there's no denying, and I didnae show ye the respect ye were due, but I—"

Flora cut him off by grasping the front of his shirt and pulling him downward, tipping back her head to offer her lips. For several long, delicious, wonderful moments, there was only his mouth and hers, the warmth and strength of his arms, and the rapid beating of their hearts, pressed close.

His hands smoothed down her back to her waist, drawing her to him in the way she'd dreamt of, all the while alone and frightened, fearing she'd never see him again.

When he broke away, it was to pull her even more firmly to him, curling her beneath his chin. He murmured softly. "I cannae tell ye how I thought o' yer kiss these days past."

A flame of hope kindled within Flora. Pushing against his chest she made him look her in the eye. "We barely ken one another, and I was long set on killing ye, for which I hope ye can forgive me, but—"

It was Ragnall's turn to interrupt. Cupping Flora's cheek, he held her gaze. "Dinnae speak o' what's past. Even when I believed the worst of ye, I couldnae hold myself blameless. Ye acted like a true Dalreagh, honouring yer father's memory. I cannae be angry wi' ye for that."

Flora's flame grew brighter. "Ye must know, husband, the only place I want to be is by yer side. I willnae let another take ma place. I'm yer wife, and none shall come between us."

Surprise passed across Ragnall's features, then joyful hope. "I couldnae have commanded ye tae offer what must be freely given."

He rested his forehead upon hers. "In return, ye shall have ma lifelong devotion, but I fear ye must know all there is tae know afore ye make yer decision, for ye've no doubt heard more gossip than truth about ma family."

A swell of compassion filled Flora's breast. She'd no wish to cause him pain by obliging him to tell any part of the story Calder had revealed so cruelly. "Nay. I know enough. All that matters is that ye dinnae wish tae repeat the mistakes of yer forebears." Looking into Ragnall's eyes, she knew he would never lie to her. His history had made that abhorrent to him. "I love ye, husband."

"And I ye, wife, with a burning passion—ne'er mind that ye cannae milk a cow." She gave his chest a playful punch, but any protest she was inclined to make was soon forgotten as his lips found hers again.

From far off came the strain of pipes, carrying through the castle, their music reminding all of the passing of the old and beginning of the new.

"'Tis midnight." Ragnall threaded his fingers through Flora's hair, straightening the tumble of fiery curls. "And I must ask ye again, *mo chridhe*. With every man within these walls as witness, will ye let our hands be fastened again, and hear ma pledge tae love ye forevermore?"

"Aye." Flora nodded. "And we'll show them how 'tis done, when husband and wife choose one another above all things."

Epilogue

Seven months later...

WITH A FINAL FLOURISH, Flora set aside her quill and blotted the ink. Sitting back, she admired her handiwork. No doubt, there were some who could craft their letters better than she, but she was proud, nonetheless, of her mastery of writing. Even by candlelight, she could see the lines were balanced and there was no excess of ink to spoil the effect.

The door softly opened and closed again, and the footsteps she knew so well approached. Familiar hands came to rest upon her shoulders and the husband she loved dropped a kiss upon her bare neck.

“Penning more of yer notes, ma love?” Ragnall kissed her nape, one hand cupping her breast while the other came to rest upon her rounded belly. “Have ye reached the chapter on how to go about milking the cows yet—or perhaps one on murdering yer husband?”

“Away wi’ ye!” Laughing, Flora smacked at the hand squeezing her, though she smiled as Ragnall nuzzled at her ear. “I’ve been writing the ingredients for cloutie dumpling. If ma volume is tae include all the things useful tae our daughters, we shouldnae leave out such an important recipe.”

“Indeed, we shouldnae.” Ragnall grazed his mouth lower, pushing away the edge of Flora’s gown. Taking his kisses along her collarbone, he looked at her from the outer edge of her shoulder. “’Tis my opinion that the bairn ye be carrying is a son, but I’ve nae objection to us continuing our duties until ye’ve a clutch o’ daughters to pass yer wisdom to. They’ll be known throughout the land as the cleverest of lassies, nae doubt.”

Flora smiled contentedly. It pleased her no end that Ragnall

approved of her knowing how to read, and to write. She'd great plans, in fact, to ensure that everyone at the castle knew their letters. Maggie had already proven a quick learner, and there was no child of Balmore who couldn't now write their name.

"What of the chapter on teaching yer man how to please ye in bed?" Ragnall's thumb brushed her nipple, making Flora catch her breath. "Do we have room to add more there?"

"Ye are a wicked man, Ragnall Dalreagh, coming tae distract me when I've so much still tae do." But Flora leant her head back upon his chest and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the feel of his mouth, trailing more kisses, warm against her cool skin.

"I'm dedicating a whole section to husbands, as it happens." She sighed as Ragnall lifted her, carrying her gently to the bed. Lying still, she laughed as he worshipped her from her ankles, all the way upward, until she gasped and laughed some more, and gasped again.

"Ye've a chapter on this I suppose." His voice came muffled from beneath her skirts.

"Oh, aye. 'Twill be a hefty chapter." Flora buried her cry of pleasure against the back of her hand as Ragnall lifted her bottom a little, to more easily demonstrate the finer points of what should be included. "But more research..." she panted, hardly able to catch her breath, "would be favourable."

Flora never doubted that Ragnall would oblige.

There were no more words then. Only the sweet comfort of two souls well met, and with no place else they wished to be than in the other's arms.



Read on, for more romance and intrigue within the Dalreagh clan, at
Castle Dunrannoch...

The Lady's Guide to Mistletoe and Mayhem

by Emmanuelle de Maupassant



The wild moors of Scotland, 1904

Texas rancher Rye Dalreagh is being thrown in at the deep-end as the long-lost heir to Castle Dunrannoch, with five potential brides to choose from and a whole lot to learn about being a 'proper gentleman'.

Ursula needs to hide from her dastardly guardian and his oafish marriage plans, until her inheritance unlocks on her twenty-fifth birthday.

A chance meeting on a train has Ursula taking on the identity of an elderly etiquette teacher, and heading to the castle to whip her 'young charge' into shape—but horse-riding, cow-lassoing, Stetson-wearing Rye is a whole lot more than she's bargained for.

Rye is expected to choose a bride but, with a murderer on the loose, and an ancient Scottish curse to navigate, will he ever make it down the aisle?

Prologue

Arrington Hall, Buckinghamshire 25th December, 1887

“REALLY EUSTACE, there’s no need to cry about it!”

Ursula gave a great sigh. She’d only pointed out that Eustace’s wooden guardsman wasn’t wearing the proper sort of boots and that his jacket didn’t have the correct number of buttons. It was merely an observation. He didn’t need to blub! Sometimes, he was as bad as his little sisters.

“Look, he can still marry my Penelope. She won’t mind about it. Stand him up and they can say their vows.”

With a sniffle, Eustace did as he was told.

“What sort of boots are they meant to be then?” He touched the felt, frowning.

“Leather, of course, extending to the knee. It takes at least five pounds of beeswax to polish them.” Ursula was rather proud of knowing such things. “I’ll ask Papa if you might come with us next time you’re in town and we go to the barracks. It’s not far from the Eaton Square house to Hyde Park.”

Licking her finger, she wiped a smudge from Penelope’s cheek. “I’ve sat on one of the horses, although I had to be lifted on, since they’re all sixteen hands. We might ask for you to take a ride if you like.”

A look of terror crossed Eustace’s face. “I—I’d rather not. Still a bit scared to be honest, since the pony threw me.”

Ursula squeezed Eustace’s hand. “Sorry about that. I forgot.”

Lots of things about him were rather annoying but he couldn’t help it, she supposed. Not everyone could be brave all the time, and she was lucky, after all, being allowed to accompany Papa to all sorts of

interesting places.

Her governess, Miss Scratchley, had departed a few months ago and Papa had ended up taking Ursula into the factory for a while. She'd learnt all sorts of things, with Papa showing her how the leather was cut and the machinery which helped shape and sew the various sorts of footwear they produced there.

Next, he'd promised to let her see the order book and show her how to use the various columns to work out what things had cost and what you sold them for. He'd said it would be useful, one day, when she was running a household of her own.

It was all fascinating. Papa was finding her a new governess soon, but she'd much rather go to the factory with him.

Mama—now in Heaven—would be pleased, Ursula was sure, even though Grandfather Arrington disapproved. At their Christmas luncheon, he'd told Papa that he didn't want to hear anything about his "low-class toil" at Fairbury and Berridge, and her uncle had agreed, calling it "vulgar".

It made no sense to Ursula. On a previous visit, she'd heard Aunt Philippa call her mother a "desirable match", because Fairbury and Berridge "did very well", so it seemed rather rum for Grandpapa and Uncle Cedric to make such a fuss.

The business had been in her mother's family for over two hundred years, and Ursula didn't see why earning money from making something so useful should be frowned upon. Moreover, they weren't just any boots! The Queen herself had once shaken Papa's hand, thanking him for supplying the footwear for her royal household, including her beloved Mounted Regiment.

Grown-ups got themselves worked up about the strangest things.

Besides which, there weren't any male Fairburys to carry on with things, her mother having had no brothers or uncles, so what else was to be done? And Papa seemed very good at it.

"Come on, Penelope." She placed a kiss on the doll's forehead. "Time to wed your guardsman, and then you can ride off on an adventure together."

Extracting two toffees from her pocket, she passed one to Eustace. "Make him stand up straight, now."

Eustace popped his into his mouth and sucked thoughtfully. "I suppose they'll want me to get married, one day. If I do have to, can it

be to you, Ursula? I shouldn't mind so much...if it was you."

"But I don't know if I shall." Ursula looked sideways at Eustace. "Get married, that is." She rearranged the lace ruffle at Penelope's neck. "Ladies take husbands so that they'll have someone to look after them, but I'd rather look after myself. Papa says I'll inherit his half of the partnership and I can do anything I like."

"Oh!" Looking altogether dismal, Eustace pulled off the guardsman's hat. "I think I had it the wrong way about. I imagined it might be you looking after me."

Ursula leaned over to kiss her cousin on the cheek. "Don't worry, Eustace. Whatever happens, we'll always look out for each other."

"You promise?" Eustace looked decidedly uncertain.

"Yes, and we'll never do anything we don't want to."

"Never?"

"Not if I can help it." With a grin, she unwrapped another sweet.

Chapter One

Castle Dunrannoch *23rd November, 1904*

“WAKE UP, LACHLAN!”

Lady Balmore prodded her husband’s shoulder.

With a snort, he bolted upright. “What is it, Mary? What’s going on?”

“The door!” Lady Balmore whispered. “Someone’s there.”

“Then answer the damned thing!” Viscount Balmore yanked the covers back over himself, mumbling a few choice words.

“Lachlan!” She shook him again. “I don’t think it’s Murray or Philpotts. It was such a strange sort of knock—not their usual way at all.”

“What are ye talking about, woman! Strange knocking! It’s likely the plumbing. Get ye to sleep and leave me to the same.”

Lady Balmore returned her head to the pillow but remained alert.

Only the night before, Lachlan’s grandmother, the dowager countess, had sworn she’d seen a shrouded figure wafting through her dressing room. It had disappeared before her maid had arrived, of course.

The castle was supposedly brimming with apparitions. There was a headless warrior who stalked the battlements, a wretched chambermaid who ran sobbing through the minstrel’s gallery, and the fearsome fetch of Camdyn Dalreagh, first chieftain, who was said to play a ghostly rendition on the bagpipes whenever a member of the clan was due to meet his end.

Lady Balmore had never liked the moor, nor the castle. She wasn’t even particularly fond of those living in it. She’d been far happier in their lovely townhouse in Edinburgh. The shops really were most

excellent, and there were always friends to call upon. That was where she and Lachlan should be—not here, in the middle of nowhere, having to step into Brodie’s shoes.

But what could one do? A frayed strap beneath his saddle was the cause they’d said—and now his brother was no more and Lachlan was obliged to step up.

The old laird had been bedridden these five years and couldn’t last much longer. Lachlan would then be Earl of Dunrannoch. She ought to be pleased, she knew, but all she could think of was being obliged to spend the rest of her days in this damp and draughty hulk of granite. It was simply too misery-making!

With a sigh, she closed her eyes. She must make the best of things—and there were only a few more weeks until the Yule season. She’d take Bonnie and arrange a prolonged stay at the apartments in Princes Street, on the pretext of needing to purchase gifts and so on. The younger girls could join her upon completing their Michaelmas term at Miss McBride’s Academy for Ladies and they’d have a jolly time of it.

Yes, she’d go up to town. Goodness knows, she deserved some respite from this dreary abode.

She was just drifting off when the knocking came again. Five slow taps, with a lengthy pause between.

Nobody announced themselves like that.

“Lachlan!” Lady Balmore shook him again. “The door!”

“Ah, ye doaty woman! Am I to have nae peace ’till you’ve had me oot o’ this bed?”

The viscount lit the candle at his bedside and shuffled his feet into his slippers. Fumbling for his dressing gown, he continued cursing.

“I’ll look noo, then I want to hear nae more about it!”

Entering the corridor, all was dark, but for the small circle of light about his person. There were few enough windows, each narrow and embedded deep in the walls. It took a full moon and a cloudless sky to illuminate this part of the castle.

Balmore held the candle aloft. “There’s nae a soul here, Mary. ’Tis jus’ yer imagination playin’ sleeokit!”

Shaking his head, he made to return but, just at that moment, the distant wailing began. Balmore froze on the spot!

It couldn’t be. Not again!

A full six months had passed since the phantom bagpipes had last been heard; and Brodie's death had followed on the morn. 'Twas Camdyn Dalreagh returned to warn them once more!

With trembling hand, Balmore approached the stairwell balcony, peering into the shadowy depths from which the mournful ululation rose.

It must be Father's time, may the Lord have mercy on him, taking him to his rest.

Balmore sent up a silent prayer.

'Twould be fitting to go to his bedside and hold the old man's hand as he passed to the next world.

His father's chamber was on the floor below. Grasping the bannister, he felt his way to the cold stone wall and the first downward steps.

All too late did Balmore feel the draught of movement behind him. A great shove in the small of his back propelled him into thin air. Landing on the fifth step, Balmore dashed his skull upon the stone's edge.

As soft footsteps retreated, the bagpipes too faded. The candle which had flown before him guttered, and the darkness was complete.

Chapter Two

Santa Maria Ranch, near San Antonio, Texas *3rd August, 1905*

RYE LOOKED up as the door opened. José Luis and Antonio nodded to him as they stepped through, followed by Alejandra.

“It won’t be long.” She raised red-rimmed eyes to Rye’s and seemed to consider saying more but simply touched his arm. “I’ll send coffee and some hot water for washing.”

Rye had come straight away, not even changing his clothes, the dust still thick on his face. All this time he’d been away, driving the cattle up to the railhead.

He shouldn’t have gone. He wouldn’t have gone. Not if he’d realized.

Had Alejandra known?

Not that it mattered.

None of it mattered.

“I’m here, Pa.”

Rory Dalreagh turned to face his son. But for two high points of colour in his cheeks, he was deathly pale. Rye took the chair by the bed and slipped his hand into his father’s.

“I’ve something to show you, Rye.” A folded piece of paper lay on the coverlet. “I should have given it to you when it came but I wasn’t ready. Not then. I thought we had more time.” He gave the half-smile Rye knew so well, then wheezed and turned away, coughing.

Lifting his father upright, Rye brought his arms about the older man’s shoulders. “You have time, Pa.” Rye rubbed his back. “Take it slow now.”

He saw the spots of blood on the linen, and more on the pillow. Blood in the handkerchief his father held to his mouth.

“Just a bit...short of breath.”

His father took the water Rye passed him, managing a sip, though he seemed to have difficulty swallowing.

Rye’s chest constricted hard. His father had been getting weaker these past months. Now, his face was etched cruelly with pain and, beneath the thin nightshirt, his body was skin and bone. Rory Dalreagh had always been strong, working on the ranch alongside Pedro, his partner—working harder still since Pedro had died, four years ago.

“Read it.” His father’s fingers fluttered over the dove-grey notepaper, his voice insistent.

The letter was written in an elegant hand, covering both sides in tight script, and bearing a gold crest.

Dunrannoch Castle
Perthshire
December 18th, 1904

My dear Rory

I hope this finds you well and that you will be kind enough to indulge me in reading all I must impart. Please believe that I remain your devoted step-mother, despite the troubles of the past.

Your father wished to write by his own hand but is indisposed at this time, being beset by arthritis, and by a great depression of spirits, in which we all share.

He has urged me to write to you on his behalf, but please know that I write from my own heart also. I pray that this letter finds you, though it must travel such a distance to do so.

Despite the estrangement that has existed between your father and yourself these thirty years, he has never ceased to regret the angry words exchanged and your hasty departure. His dearest wish is that those offences may be forgiven, and a reconciliation achieved.

I discovered some time ago that you had kept correspondence with Mrs. Middymuckle. Owing to the circumstances under which I write, I was able to persuade that good lady to share with me your address, and to impart what news she felt comfortable to share of your life in the New World.

From her, I learnt of your wife’s death soon after your arrival in Texas, following the birth of your son. I hope you will accept my condolences.

Perhaps the news I share here may gladden her, even as she watches over you from the celestial sphere, and that what may come to pass shall make some reparation for the injustices of the past.

With sadness, I must tell you that both your brothers, Brodie and Lachlan, have been lost to us within these past twelve months. We need not discuss the details at length, suffice to say that their passing was unexpected—through mishap rather than illness, and that the family has been deeply shocked and saddened. Your father’s grief, as you may imagine, has been severe.

Were I to have correctly addressed this letter, I should have named you Balmore, for the viscountcy now falls to you, as your father’s heir.

You have built a life for yourself, far from this ancestral seat, but Dunrannoch needs you.

I exhort you to return home, to take the mantle of your title, and to fulfil our best hopes.

With all regard and fondest love

Lavinia Dalreagh

Countess Dunrannoch

FROWNING, Rye set the letter aside. He knew the story of why his father had left Scotland—knew that it was the choosing of his bride that had brought the estrangement.

Ailsa had been a companion to Rory’s grandmother, Flora Dalreagh—beneath their attention, as far as the earl had been concerned. Even as the third son, Rory had been expected to marry into the gentry. Ailsa had been a rector’s daughter. Genteel for sure, but not sufficiently well-positioned to please the Dalreaghs.

It had always angered Rye, this knowledge of how his mother had been treated—and his father, of course.

“They’ll have to do without you.” Rye spoke brusquely. “They gave up on you all those years ago. Why should you return now, just because it’s convenient for them?”

“Duty.” Rory lay his head back upon the pillows. “It’s the only reason that matters.”

“I’ll write the reply. I’ll explain. What they’re asking is too much. Let them find someone else.” Rye took up the paper, folded it small

and pushed it into his pocket.

“They already need someone else.”

Rye placed his hand within his father’s. The fingers were wasted thin, the skin papery. He wanted to tell him not to speak this way—that he just needed to rest, that he’d grow strong again.

But that would be a lie.

He’d been able to make himself believe it before he’d left on the cattle drive—but he wasn’t a fool.

“It’s you they need.” His father’s gaze remained fixed on Rye’s. “I can’t make you do anything you don’t wish to. A man has to go his own way. I know that better than anyone. But I want you to go, Rye. I want you to be what they need you to be. It’s more than a title. There’s an estate to run—just like this ranch, but with a lot more people to care for. Your tenants, relying on you to keep things running smoothly.”

Rory’s face was pale, coated in a sheen of sweat, and his voice rasping but he held firm to Rye’s hand. “José Luis and Antonio have witnessed my will, Rye. I’m leaving the ranch to Alejandra and the boys. With Juan coming up for twenty-two and the others close behind, they know what they’re doing.”

An ache seared Rye’s chest. He’d been born on the ranch—had been raised here boy and man. The landscape, the cattle, the horses, the people—they were part of who he was.

And his father wanted him to walk away?

“Pedro’s family owned the ranch long before I came in as partner. It’s only right that his sons take over.

“Head east, take the train, book yourself a passage from New York. Find your way to Dunrannoch. They’ll take care of you. Find you a wife in the bargain, I’ll bet! You’re coming on for twenty-seven Rye. A man can’t stay single forever. Telegram ahead and they’ll have her lined right up—some rose-complexioned beauty to make your heart hammer faster than a stampeding herd of longhorns!” Rory’s laughter was brief, dissolving in a fit of coughing.

Rye brought the water to his father’s lips again.

“I’m just a plain Texas rancher and that’s a whole ’nother world. ’Fraid I’ll make a sorry excuse for a viscount.”

“You’re a Dalreagh. We’re stubborn and proud but we do our duty.” He squeezed Rye’s fingers. “You’ll do just fine.”

He gave his half-smile again. “Besides which, it sounds like it won’t be long before the whole caboodle is yours. My father’s a tough old goat but you’ll soon be stepping into his boots. You’ll be more than a viscount; you’ll be an earl.”

And I don’t want any of it, thought Rye. *Only for you to stay with me—for everything to carry on as it always has. You and me on the ranch, Pa. This is all I’ve known. It’s my home.*

Could he do this?

His father’s eyes were already closing. He was exhausted from whatever was eating him up inside.

One thing was for sure: Rye was his father’s son. If he set his mind to something, he’d do it.

He’d show the Dalreaghs that his father had done a fine job raising him.

“Well, it sounds mighty swell, Pa.”

Content to hear the words, Rory passed into fitful sleep.

Rye splashed his face and hands clean, drank the coffee, and reclined alongside his father. With the curtains open, silvered light illuminated the foot of the bed—a bright thread leading into the night.

Rye lay awake, holding his father’s hand, listening to the ragged draw of his breath.

At last, the body that had become so frail lay still and calm.

Rory Dalreagh slipped beyond pain, following that moonlit path.

Chapter Three

Arrington House, Eaton Square, Belgravia *Afternoon, 12th December, 1905*

TILLY, Ursula's maid, entered her mistress's bedchamber. As had become her recent habit, Ursula was seated at the window with a book, but appearing to concentrate neither on the view nor the text in her lap.

Pushing the door closed behind her, Tilly gave a slight cough and bobbed a curtsy as Ursula looked her way. "His Lordship wishes to see you in the library, miss."

With a sigh, Ursula set aside the novel she'd begun several days ago without reaching further than the twentieth page. It was impossible to keep her mind on anything for more than a few minutes.

Just over three months had passed since her father's funeral. Time was needed—as everyone had been telling her, in the most sympathetic of tones. She wasn't the first to lose the person she loved most. At this very moment, there were probably thousands of young women in London bereaved of their parents and having to face a new sort of future. One simply kept one's chin high and soldiered through.

Such platitudes were supposed to make her feel better. But, of course, they didn't.

On that last morning, she'd kissed her papa goodbye, reminding him that she'd be along around noon to help inspect the new shipment of leather. Though he'd remained reluctant to allow Ursula to spend full days at the factory, he'd begun to take more seriously her desire to learn about the business. Little by little, she'd persuaded him to share the finer points of how Fairbury and Berridge was run, and to allow her to become involved.

She'd been tying her hat when the messenger had knocked boldly

at the front entrance, breathing hard from his caper across Victoria Bridge. She'd pushed him into her carriage and they'd set off through the slug of traffic, Ursula all the while trying to extricate more information from Mr. Berridge's lad.

By the time they'd arrived, it was too late. The doctor was packing up his bag. A quick end, he'd assured her—a single seizure to the heart. A moment of brief pain. Nothing more.

Shaking out her crêpe skirts, Ursula stood. An audience with her uncle, Viscount Arrington, was never pleasurable, but she appreciated the need to be courteous to his requests.

She'd been grateful at the time, when he'd made the necessary arrangements and instructed Ursula to stay with the family in Eaton Square. He'd been adamant that the Pimlico house, purchased for being close to the Battersea workshops, was unsuitable—and most especially for a young lady alone.

The change of surroundings had been welcome, since every room in the home she'd shared with her father brought her to tears.

Now though, she was itching to do something, to go somewhere, to escape this terrible feeling of everything being wrong.

Her days contained a cycle of nothingness in which the afternoon ride through Hyde Park had become the highlight—crushed between Aunt Phillippa and Lucy, with Amelia, Harriet and Eustace seated opposite.

Other days, there was just Eustace and herself, with Aunt Phillippa as chaperone, which was just plain awkward.

Yesterday, she'd mentioned visiting Fairbury and Berridge, to see how they were managing without her father, but Uncle Cedric had brushed away the idea, suggesting that she accompany her cousins on a shopping trip to Burlington Arcade.

So, she'd written him a note, making clear her wish to return to the Pimlico house and resume her regular habits.

She was suffocating at Arrington House, as if part of her had died alongside her father, and the part that remained was desperate to draw breath.



“YOUR FATHER INDULGED you far too freely.”

From behind his writing desk, Uncle Cedric fixed Ursula with an imperious eye. "Here you are, not far off your twenty-fifth birthday and you still haven't formalized things with Eustace."

Ursula shifted in her seat and gave an inward sigh. At seventeen, Eustace had proposed that she marry him if she didn't find anyone else she wanted. They only saw each other at family gatherings and she'd hoped, by now, that he'd realized it was just a childish notion. There was nothing of substance behind it. They were fond of one another, but nothing more.

Eustace, at the instigation of his father—she had no doubt—had proposed an engagement three times since she'd turned twenty, and she'd refused a proper answer on each occasion. There was no question of love—nor of him having a broken heart. In the intervening years, each time she'd evaded him, he'd seemed almost relieved.

In fairness, it wasn't just Eustace she wasn't keen on. There wasn't anyone she wanted to settle down with (or settle for)—and there had been plenty of gentlemen from which to choose.

During the season in which Aunt Phillippa had presented her at court, at least three young men had paid calls. Even Mr. Berridge's son had made an earnest offer—with a speech on the wisdom of uniting their two houses, as if they were characters in a Shakespearean play.

She hadn't been interested. They'd all been fops.

If she married Eustace, or anyone else, would they let her pursue anything of her own? Or would they be like Uncle Cedric, proclaiming that a woman's sphere was within the home and that to look outside it for occupation was vulgar?

How could she possibly explore her own interests if she was obliged to obey her husband all the time?

Fairbury and Berridge was part of the world of men. The world of activity and commerce, where you made decisions and things happened. She wasn't ready for her life to be a round of morning calls and musical afternoons punctuated by dinner parties and soirées.

"Wifehood and motherhood!" Uncle Cedric banged his fist on the mahogany tabletop. "Those are the occupations that should matter to you, Ursula. This nonsense about taking over your father's business has got to stop. It would bring utter disrepute on the noble Arrington name."

He went to stand by the fire, then looked at her for some moments

—as if weighing up what to say next, since she'd given no reply. Ursula sat straight-backed. Her uncle was entitled to his opinion, and, this being his house, she would sit and listen while he gave forth, but it would change not a whit her own position in the matter.

Smoothing down his moustache, he frowned. "It was bad enough that your father stooped to becoming involved in such unsavoury business."

Ursula blinked twice.

Unsavoury?

Her uncle hadn't seemed to find the profits of that business so vile last year, when he'd requested funds to repair the roof of Arrington Hall. There had been other instances, too, all logged in her father's ledgers.

Her uncle continued. "Your father's marriage to your mother was one of expediency, having no fortune of his own and no expectation of the title with which I am now endowed. Your mother was base-born, with only her wealth to recommend her."

Ursula sucked in her breath.

How dare he! The vile, snobbish, insulting hypocrite.

But Uncle Cedric wasn't finished. His lip curled in an ugly sneer. "It's unfortunate that this is the stock from which you're drawn, but I've always treated you as one of our own, overlooking the disadvantage of your birth. It is with us that you belong, and your marriage to Eustace shall assure you of a place in society. Whatever others may think in private, they shall not dare utter in your presence, once you are allied to my heir."

Through clenched jaws, Ursula spoke with barely contained fury. "Grandfather was happy enough to overlook my mother's 'disadvantages' when he agreed to the betrothal, with a handsome dowry attached, while the 'unfortunate' source of my mother's wealth has not deterred you from making use of it." A trembling rage was filling her, now she'd begun.

"Such rudeness!" The viscount's left eye was twitching, while the other bulged in an alarming manner. "It is you, niece, who are failing to observe the proprieties! Were I a lesser man, I would dismiss you from this house immediately. As it is, I bid you to keep to your room until you have an apology to deliver and a more civil tongue in your head."

Ursula also stood, drawing to her full—if modest—height, but without intention of leaving.

She still had plenty to say.

“If my forthrightness offends you, Uncle, then I suggest you look to the cause. As to leaving this house, nothing shall give me greater pleasure.” She held her chin high. “I’ll apply to Mr. Bombardine’s office of law in the morning, for full access to my father’s papers, and shall arrange a meeting with Mr. Berridge forthwith. You need nevermore be concerned with the Arrington name being sullied, for I shall refute any claim that we are related!”

“Abominable, ungrateful girl!” The viscount’s nostrils flared large. “By all means, visit Bombardine, and he shall tell you not only that my guardianship of you, and of all the assets in your possession, continues until your twenty-fifth birthday, but that the Pimlico house has been sold—”

“Sold?” The heat in Ursula’s chest rushed to her head. “You cannot mean—”

“I do.” He moved to the window, not even looking at her. “The contents were auctioned off last month, and your personal possessions brought here; placed in storage in the attic of this house.”

Ursula grasped the table’s edge, suddenly speechless.

He turned towards her again, a malicious glint in his eyes. “Your stake-holding in Fairbury and Berridge has been dissolved.”

The last he uttered with marked relish.

Dissolved?

Her throat constricted.

Surely not! It couldn’t be true.

“You’ve sold my father’s share in the business?” She struggled to project her voice but he heard her all right.

A slow, triumphant smile spread across her uncle’s face. “I see we understand each other. As your guardian, the decision was mine and Mr. Berridge was most obliging. Not only did he appreciate your reluctance to continue an association with the business, but offered a very fair price to release you from the partnership. Naturally, wishing to fulfil my duties, I accepted on your behalf.”

Ursula spluttered, but nothing of coherence emerged.

Her uncle made a study of his fingernails. “Of course, the terms of your father’s will only allow you to enjoy the interest of that capital,

upon the arrival of your forthcoming birthday.”

Glancing upward, he fixed Ursula with a beady stare. “Full entitlement must wait until such time as you marry—or reach the spinsterly age of thirty years.” He inclined his head. “All the more reason for you to apologize for your hasty words, and fix a date for your betrothal to Eustace.”

“And until my birthday?” The question emerged as a whisper.

“The interest is at my disposal, to allocate as I see fit. Several of the rooms at Arrington Hall require refurbishment, and you can have no objection. The house will pass to Eustace one day.” He gave her a tight smile. “You’ll receive the benefit at last, and your children will, in turn, inherit.”

Though her legs felt entirely numb, she managed to cross the thick pile of the Persian rug and reach the door. She knew his eyes followed her, thinking that he’d won, that her immediate lack of means would keep her under his roof—not just for these coming weeks but beyond—that the thought of setting out into the unknown would daunt her.

Viscount Arrington didn’t know her at all.

Chapter Four

The Highland Caledonian Overnight Sleeper to Fort William *Early morning, 13th December*

WITH THE LURCH of the train, Ursula was tossed onto her side and almost thrown from the little cot in her compartment. She'd been awake through most of the past hours, she was sure, but the jolt had certainly woken her.

She wasn't in her own bed—neither in Pimlico nor Eaton Square—and it was uncomfortably chilly. Fortunately, she'd slept in most of her clothes.

Pulling on her cardigan, she swung her stockinged feet to the floor and lifted the blind. Light was barely creeping into the sky, the moon fading against a backdrop of delicate violet-grey, yet the landscape glowed white.

And there were mountains!

The sort that loomed so majestically you had to crane your neck to see their jagged peaks. Their ridges and upper crags were heavily snow-topped, while the lower planes and the moorland beneath were crusted thick with frost.

There was no doubt about it. She was in Scotland—and there was most certainly no going back.

If dawn was near breaking, it wouldn't be long until they reached Fort William.

She fought a sudden wave of nausea.

What had she done?

It had seemed the only option yesterday—to pack a large carpet bag and swear Tilly to utmost confidentiality. Ursula hadn't a great deal of coin but enough for the ticket, and for the hire of some transport at the other end.

The note she'd scrawled for Eustace would stop him worrying. He'd always been a good friend. He'd want her to be happy. He'd understand.

And he'd keep her whereabouts secret. It was only thirteen days until her birthday. Once it came, she'd have enough income of her own to live upon. Modestly, perhaps, but enough. And she'd be her own person, without needing to ask for anything.

As for where she might go until then, Ursula had immediately thought of Daphne. Hardly a month went by without an exchange between them, and she'd often mentioned how much she'd love Ursula to visit.

They'd met at the Ventissori Academy. Ursula had hardly been a star pupil but her father had been adamant that she attend, and she'd wanted to please him. Together, she and Daphne had practised how to daintily swallow an oyster and remove a lobster from its shell, how to tell apart their forks for fruit and fish, and how to fold napkins into elaborate whimsies.

Finding everything such a bore, Ursula had resorted to making the other girls laugh—mimicking Monsieur Ventissori's mincing walk and his Gallic histrionics. Daphne had disapproved but always covered for her and, when their Academy days came to an end, had insisted on them keeping in touch.

Daphne was spending Christmas with her parents, only twelve miles east of Fort William.

Once I get there, I'll simply find a cab for hire, or someone with a cart if need be, thought Ursula. It would be wonderful to see Daphne again.

Why then, did Ursula feel like she wanted to vomit?

Hugging her cardigan closer, she searched about for her footwear.

Breakfast. That was what was needed.

All things were more manageable once you'd eaten. She'd find the dining car and order something comforting.

Her life was in a mess but if she was to sort it out, porridge—hot and sweet—and a steaming pot of tea would be a good place to start.



CONSUMING a generous helping of sausages and grilled tomatoes lifted Ursula's spirits. As did the toasted muffins. And the porridge, served

with cream and honey.

Meanwhile, the sun rose, flashing into view between the eastern mountains.

Still, a knot continued to pull tight within her chest.

Ursula sighed, wondering if the waiter might be prevailed upon to supply more tea, but he seemed to have disappeared altogether.

The carriage was surprisingly empty but for herself, an elderly lady and a party of three clergymen at the far end.

Ursula was staring dolefully into her empty cup when a kindly voice carried to her ear.

“I’ve plenty in my pot if you’re still in need of whetting the whistle.”

With her chin dipped to peer over her reading spectacles, the owner of the voice was eyeing Ursula.

“And the company would be welcome.” She inclined her head towards the seat opposite and, with a grateful smile, Ursula gathered her belongings.

“Urania Abernathy,” said the lady, proffering a hand much wrinkled, though steady enough in pouring the tea. She delved into the large handbag at her elbow and plucked out a hip flask, adding a tippie of something dark and potent to the darjeeling.

“One needs extra warming at my age.” Miss Abernathy took an appreciative sip, then burrowed again into the bag’s depths. Withdrawing a bar of Fry’s chocolate cream, she broke off two segments.

She and Ursula sat in companionable silence for a few moments, watching through the windows as the Highland scenery whisked by.

“You’re visiting family?” asked Ursula, having sucked away the last of the soft-centred fondant.

“Someone’s family, yes—but not my own.” Holding up a piece of notepaper, Miss Abernathy squinted at the close-written script. “I’d intended some time with my sister on the Dorset coast, but this arrived a fortnight ago. A recommendation through Lady Forres. Most unusual, and generous remuneration. My little holiday shall wait until the new year.”

Ursula smiled politely and drank her tea.

Of course, Miss Abernathy must be a governess. Not just her costume—of plain, worsted wool—but her manner proclaimed it.

There, but for my inheritance, go I. Ursula inwardly shuddered. Children were not her forte. The idea of dedicating her life to making them sit up straight and learn their manners was too horrendous to contemplate.

“The grandson of Earl Dunrannoch.” Miss Abernathy folded the letter away and rested her hands in her lap. “I’ve made a special request for the train to stop at Gorton, on the edge of the moor. I only hope that the carriage is waiting. One can get so cold standing about.”

Miss Abernathy’s pale blue eyes regarded Ursula. “And you? Family in the Highlands? I know most of the older seats.”

“A friend.” Ursula was seized by sudden panic. “And her family live very quietly.” She gave a tight smile. “Like hermits. Almost.”

Urania Abernathy’s eyebrows rose into the quiff of her silver hair.

“How unusual!”

She said nothing more, merely settling back to close her eyes.

The contents of the hip flask must have been rather potent for, the next minute, she was gently snoring.

Ursula returned her gaze to the great outdoors. She’d always wanted to visit the Highlands, and here it was—looking just as windswept as she’d imagined. Mile after mile of emptiness. Nothing but the moorlands and the mountains and the huge, open sky. Where habitation did come into view, it was modest indeed. The cottages, scarlet-roofed and white-washed, looked large enough to contain only a single room.

What was Daphne’s place called? Kintochlochie? She’d described it many times, bewailing fireplaces that refused to draw—or belched smoke, draughty corridors and windows that rattled with the wind. It had sounded terribly romantic, apart from having to eat haggis, which didn’t appeal at all.

Daphne’s last letter had mentioned a new beau—the heir to a turkey farming empire, in Norfolk no less. Not a mountain in sight. She’d seemed nothing but excited at the prospect, with no words of remorse at having to leave behind all this wild gloriousness.

Ursula’s stomach churned, threatening to bring a reappearance of her breakfast.

Castle Kintochlochie didn’t yet have a telephone, but perhaps she should have asked Tilly to arrange a telegram. At least, then, she wouldn’t be arriving wholly unannounced. Turning up on someone’s

doorstep did seem rather an imposition—and so close to Christmas. She'd acted without thinking it through and, now, here she was, hurtling towards a problem—not to mention the sort of weather that gave one chilblains. If Daphne's family permitted her through the door, what might be in store? Never ending haggis, probably, and men shooting things. She might not be able to go for a walk for fear of being mistaken for some poor creature destined to have its head wall-mounted.

But what could she do? Soon, the train would reach Fort William, and she had nowhere else to go.

Perhaps she should confide in Miss Abernathy and ask her advice. Ancient as she was, she must have seen a great deal of life, and she'd made her way without coming to harm.

She was still asleep however—her head lolling with the motion of the train.

Where was it she was alighting—Gorton?

The train had been passing through open heathland cloaked low in mist. Ursula struggled to recall the map. Rannoch Moor was just south of Glen Coe, wasn't it, and there were several private stations before you reached Fort William.

"Miss Abernathy." Ursula leaned forward. "Time to wake up." She touched her arm. "We're nearly there. You'll need to gather your things."

She noticed then that Miss Abernathy was no longer snoring. In fact, the older woman was altogether quiet.

Moving to the other side of the table, Ursula placed her hand over her companion's.

Quite cold.

"Urania!" Ursula gave Miss Abernathy a gentle shake, then squeaked with shock as the old lady pitched forward.

Pushing her back in the seat, Ursula propped her into the corner.

Miss Abernathy wasn't just asleep.

And she wouldn't be getting off at Gorton.

From the front of the train came the blow of a whistle. They were slowing, the brakes jarring on the track.

Was this the place?

A strange horror washed over Ursula.

The train would stop and Miss Abernathy wouldn't get out. They'd

come looking for her and find her, dead.

Natural causes of course, but the guard would need to speak to Ursula. He'd ask her questions, and wouldn't the police need to do that too, once they reached Fort William? They'd want Ursula to tell them about Miss Abernathy. They might ask Ursula for her place of residence. They might contact Uncle Cedric.

Ursula stood up.

At the other end of the dining car, the clergymen remained deeply in conversation.

The waiter was still nowhere to be seen.

Without further thought, Ursula picked up Miss Abernathy's voluminous handbag.

I'm sorry, but I have to.

Darting back to her compartment, Ursula threw her own few possessions into her luggage. She donned her coat and pushed her hat down low on her head, reaching the outer door as the train made its final, juddering halt.

Fingers trembling, she pushed down heavily on the handle and stepped out into the grey swirl of mist. Some way ahead, a shadowy figure looked out from beside the engine and waved. After a moment's hesitation, Ursula waved back, and the whistle blew again.

She stood on the tiny platform, watching the train pulling away, gathering speed, then disappearing. Towards Fort William. Towards Daphne and Kintochlochie.

Away from Ursula.

What had she done?

Chapter Five

On the edge of Rannoch Moor A little later in the morning, 13th December

ONLY WHEN HER toes began to throb and the tip of her nose went numb did Ursula realize how cold she was. Her navy-blue coat, in finest quality wool, reached almost to her ankles, but was designed more for fashion than insulation. Her gloves and scarf were similarly inadequate. Her hat did nothing to cover her ears.

The mist wrapped around her—a curling, milky haze through which the sun struggled blearily. Where the platform ended, bracken began but she could see nothing more.

No carriage. No one to meet her.

Or rather, no one to meet Miss Abernathy.

Ursula put down the bags and pursed her lips. It was really too bad. A woman of such advanced years could hardly be expected to wait indefinitely in such a remote and exposed location. Ursula felt most indignant on her behalf—not to mention her own.

Someone was supposed to be coming to collect Miss Abernathy, but that someone was late.

Ursula felt a sudden pang at what she'd done—leaving Miss Abernathy on the train like that and taking her belongings. In running away, had she left behind her sense of integrity? Her scruples? She kicked at the rolling mist, which merely shifted about her hem before closing round again.

A still, small voice inside whispered that she'd acted badly.

Walking the length of the platform, Ursula berated herself. A full twenty steps, then she turned and walked back again. It wouldn't matter how far she walked, it wouldn't change anything.

However wicked it was, she had to make the best of the situation.

But I'll do something "good" to make up for my failings. Regardless of how revolting the child is, I'll be kind to them.

At one end, there was a rough cutting through the frosted bracken leaves. Not a road but a track of sorts. Ursula could see no other. From that direction, surely, the carriage would come.

This being the case, oughtn't she to set off? The exercise, at least, would keep her blood on the move. She couldn't just stand here, getting colder and colder.

It couldn't be too far, could it?

And there were hours of daylight ahead, even though the sun was having trouble penetrating.

Where was it she was going?

Ursula knelt over Miss Abernathy's handbag. It was a sturdy thing, though the leather was cracked at the corners and the clasp tarnished. It was a handbag that had served its owner well.

Worrying her lip, Ursula pulled the metal frame wide. Inside, the contents were an unexpected jumble, but the letter was near the top: A pale grey envelope, addressed to Miss U. Abernathy at Kilmarnock Manor.

It was a convenient coincidence: their names being so similar.

Steeling herself to do what she must, Ursula scanned through. She was expected at Castle Dunrannoch on the fourteenth of the month "to undertake lessons in etiquette and manners befitting the future earl—a young man unaccustomed to the circles in which he will be moving".

Apparently, there had been a series of bereavements and the title would be falling to some unsuspecting grandson—a child for whom the family had employed Miss Abernathy.

Except that it wouldn't be Miss Abernathy turning up. It would be Ursula.

And it wasn't the fourteenth of the month; that would be tomorrow.

And, though the mist was as thick as ever, she was pretty certain that it had started to snow.

She gave a strangled gasp of laughter.

How absurd everything was.

Incomprehensibly ridiculous.

If she didn't laugh, she'd sit down on the spot and cry.

Whichever guardian angel was supposed to be looking after her,

she assumed they were having a good chuckle as well. Ursula only hoped they might give themselves a stitch from all the jolly good entertainment, because she wasn't sure how much more of this celestial humour she could bear.

Ursula got to her feet and picked up the bags.

Logic would dictate that the track led to the castle, so she simply needed to keep walking until she happened upon civilisation—or whatever passed for it in these parts.

She ignored the quiver in her chest as she left the platform, following the track. A brisk pace was the answer, and her eyes on the path at all times. Never mind that the snow was settling on her eyelashes and her teeth wanted to chatter. The castle might be only a mile or two away.

It was beautiful, in an eerie way—everything white and still and quiet.

And with each step, she was closer to sitting before a fire, being offered crumpets, and fruit cake, and scalding hot tea.

As for the matter of impersonating Miss Abernathy, she was a great believer in the power of charm. She mightn't feel terribly charming at this minute but, once she was warm again, she'd dredge some up.

Onwards she went, the cold breath of the moor on her cheek. The swish of her skirts against the stride of her legs became the rhythmic count to her pacing. She tried to ignore how the bags were making her arms ache.

All had seemed still and silent, but now she heard the invisible. Water trickling nearby. Croaking. A faint hoot.

Then something else.

A distant thud, repetitive and coming closer—though she couldn't tell from which direction. The mist and snow conspired to deaden sound, while her own breathing seemed to grow louder.

Ursula shivered.

"Is anyone there?" Her voice sounded feeble.

She moved to the edge of the track, peering through the pale vapour.

Something was in the mist. There was a snort and a pawing of the ground.

A stag? She'd never seen one but they were huge, weren't they?
With horns.

Ursula was unsure what to do for the best. If she stayed upright, she might be gored through on a candelabra of antlers. If she fell to the ground, she could be ridden under-hoof.

Before she had the chance to decide, the creature was upon her. She saw flaring nostrils and a wild eye, and gums drawn back on huge teeth.

Not a stag but a stallion, its hooves rearing up over her head.

Ursula screamed.



“WHOA THERE, CHARON!”

The man pulled his mount round sharply.

“What the hell?” A deep, drawling voice barked out above her. “I damn near killed you!”

Ursula cowered back from the frisking horse and its irate rider, quite unable to find her voice.

In a single bound, the man leapt down to stand before her.

“What in the name of all that’s holy are you doin’, wanderin’ round like a wraith? You scared the bejesus out o’ me.”

Ursula found herself looking at a man taller than any she’d seen before. Tall, wide-shouldered and well-built.

Loose-limbed too.

The way he’d kicked his heels out of the stirrups and thrown his leg over the mount’s head to jump down, he moved like an acrobat.

She blinked. “How b-big you are!”

He gave a slow smile.

“I mean t-tall! Very tall!” She was chilled to the bone, her teeth chattering madly, but Ursula felt the tingle of heat rising to her cheeks.

“Six foot, five, ma’am. Corn-fed in the heart of Texas.”

He held out his hand. “Name’s Rye, and I’m mighty pleased to meet you.”

Ursula stared at his hand a moment before shaking it. Really, it was all most peculiar.

Texas? Wasn’t that where the cowboys lived? It would explain his attire: the most ludicrous hat, and oddly shaped boots—embroidered and heeled. His coat hung open, despite the frost in the air, revealing

a checked shirt and soft trousers. There was a red kerchief, bright and patterned, at his neck, and he was unshaven and sun-darkened, like a bandit.

His hands, strong and firm, went to her shoulders, and it occurred to her that he was probably holding her up. Whether it was the cold or the shock of being near-trampled, she couldn't feel her legs at all. They were utter jelly.

Trembling, she raised her gaze to his. His eyes were quartz grey, short-lashed and heavy-lidded, and staring right back at her.

"Miss Abernathy," she said at last.

"Well, Miss Abernathy, it's colder than a blue norther out here." That drawl again, as if he were caressing her skin with every word. "If you're lost, that makes two of us, what with this damned fog."

Her breath caught, looking at his mouth. It was deliciously masculine.

"With this snow gettin' thicker we'd best lit outta here. There's a bothy roundabouts. The vapours shifted just afore I clapped eyes on you and I'm mighty sure I spied a red roof out yonder."

Without waiting for her response, he picked up the bags and tied one to either side of the rear of the saddle.

"You'll be safe up front, with me behind. I won't let you slip."

Ursula looked at his outstretched hand.

He wanted her to climb on the horse with him?

Was he mad?

She didn't know him.

And he wanted to take her to a bothy—whatever that was—where they would be alone.

He must have seen her hesitation. "You've nothin' to fear, ma'am. Charon's a devil when he's scared but he'll hold steady now. As for me, I was raised to be respectful. I'll have ma arm about your waist but I won't take no liberties, however temptin' that may be." His mouth quirked up in a half-smile.

No sooner had her fingers touched his than she was launched upwards, her toes guided to the stirrup and her bottom plonked in the saddle.

As he settled behind, she was aware of his straddling thighs tucked around hers. With one hand taking the reins, he brought the other around her middle, pulling her into his chest, and gave Charon a

gentle kick.

She'd only just met him, but he was just what she needed.

A source of heat!

Chapter Six

Rannoch Moor *Later that morning, 13th December*

HE SLITHERED off the horse and, without a by-your-leave, encompassed her waist, lifting her down. She stood in the snow, shivering, watching him untie her bags before leading the horse into a lean-to at one end of the cottage.

Resting his forehead briefly to the stallion's nose, he murmured a last endearment before shutting the half-doors.

The bothy itself was damp and earthy, the floor being no more than compacted soil. The single room contained a truckle bed, a table and chair, a cast iron woodburner, and some shelves—mostly empty. It was hardly warmer inside than it had been out, but there was a stack of fuel at any rate—not coal but peat, sliced in thick, dark bricks and stacked dry in the corner. Someone had left a tinderbox and a few sticks of kindling.

Rye bent to the task, placing the wood in a pyramid and coaxing a flame before resting a block of peat on either side.

“Come on, closer.” While she unpinned her hat, he drew up the chair for her, right by the fire, then stripped the blanket off the bed. “This’ll be better than your damp coat.”

Nodding, Ursula fumbled with the buttons, laying it over the table.

She stood in her travelling skirt, shirtwaist and long cardigan, letting him place the blanket round her shoulders, all the while trying not to think about who might last have used it.

Did the cold kill fleas?

She hoped so.

With the flames rising, he pushed-to the iron door, then made an examination of the room. There were no more blankets and nothing at

all to eat or drink, though there was a pan to cook with, and two earthenware cups.

"I'll collect some snow." He indicated the old pan. "Don't s'pose you've a few coffee beans in those bags o' yours?" The side of his mouth curled upwards.

She managed a small smile in return. "There's some Rowland's powder."

"Hot water and tooth powder—sounds delicious." He pulled a face.

While he was gone, she drew the chair closer to the burner and unlaced her boots. Her feet were soaked through. Dare she take off her stockings? She'd more chance of getting them dry if she lay them over something.

She was about to wriggle her second foot free of its worsted when Rye returned.

"Whoa there. I turn my back for a few seconds and you're gettin' bare! Least let me be here while all the excitement's happenin'." He gave her a wink.

"I was just—I really wasn't—" She looked down at her feet: one pale and the other damp in its soggy casing. "I'm being sensible," she said at last, yanking off the other foot of her stockings and tugging down her hem to cover her toes.

"Sure thing." Rye set the pan on the stovetop then scooped up the cast off underthings. "Like a rattler shedding its skin, huh?" He grinned, draping them over either side of the stove.

Best not to encourage him, Ursula decided. He's really becoming altogether too familiar.

In proof of point, having removed his coat and boots, he rolled down his own socks and lay them alongside her things. He gave her a sideways glance and another quirk of his mouth, clearly aware of her watching.

Untying the kerchief at his neck, he used it to wipe his face, but kept on his hat, merely tipping it back a few inches.

He threw another brick of peat into the burner then sat, at last, on the floor, since Ursula was occupying the only chair. One leg he stretched towards the warmth while the other he crooked at the knee, resting his elbow on top.

He was in his shirt sleeves, the fabric tight across his shoulders and arms. His trousers, too, fitted close through the hip and thigh. Where

he'd removed the kerchief, the upper two buttons of his shirt were open, revealing tufts of dark hair.

Don't look. He'll only get the wrong idea.

But Ursula couldn't help herself.

She'd seen Eustace's chest only once since he'd come of the age where men grew hair. His, she was sure, couldn't have such a covering. Besides which, Eustace was blond and didn't even have a proper moustache yet.

Rye's stubble looked like it would turn into a beard if he ignored it for a few days.

"A strange place to be, isn't it, on the moor?" She bit her lip. As an opening gambit, it wasn't the friendliest conversation starter. "I mean, are you visiting someone? For the festive season?"

That was better.

"Yup." Rye gave a slow nod. "S'pose you could say that."

"Won't they be worried about you?"

"Maybe, but they told me about this place when I was saddling up. Said I was to shelter here if the weather came in."

He fixed her with his flinted grey eyes. "And what about you, Miss Abernathy? What ya doin' in this neck of the woods?"

She'd been waiting for him to ask. Of course, she had to tell him. Once the visibility improved, she'd need him to show her the way. He must know of the castle, even having been on the moor a short time, and there was nowhere else. She could hardly stay in this bothy.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered if whichever relatives he was staying with would mind having her as a house guest for a few weeks, but she pushed the idea away immediately. Foisting herself on his family would be ridiculous. At least those at the castle were expecting her—or Miss Abernathy, rather. She'd muddle through.

"I'm headed to Castle Dunrannoch," she announced.

"Well now. Ain't that somethin'." Rye's face split in the widest grin.

"I've a post—that is, a position." She supposed there was no harm in telling him. "To teach a little boy at the castle. Table manners—that sort of thing."

"Is that right?" Rye leaned forward. "Don'cha know how old he is?"

"He's just some horror who doesn't know how to behave. It's

bound to be awful, but there we are. I'll sort him out."

"I've no doubt you shall, but he mightn't be as bad as you're thinkin'. You might even like the lil fella." His eyes flashed in amusement again.

Really, it was becoming most annoying—as if everything she said was a joke. "Unlikely!" Ursula was reluctant to dwell on what awaited her in her role as Urania Abernathy.

The stove was heating up nicely, the water simmering, making Ursula's mouth water for a cup of tea.

Urania had seemed the sort of woman who might carry a tin of her preferred blend. And there had been the chocolate; Ursula wondered if there were any left.

It seemed rather awful, now, that she'd taken Miss Abernathy's handbag—although she doubted Urania would have minded. Fetching it over, she vowed to send thanks heavenwards if it contained anything edible.

"Y' might have some chicory even?" Rye eyed the bag speculatively. "Water's near boiling."

Ursula popped open the metal clasp and peered in. On top was a ball of wool and a half-knitted bed sock, still attached to the needle. Those, Ursula lifted out and placed to one side. Underneath, everything was a jumble.

There was the flask Urania had produced in the dining car. Screwing off the top, Ursula took a tentative sip. Hot and gingery, it burnt her throat, making her splutter.

"Easy there." Rye was behind her in a flash, rubbing through the blanket as she coughed.

When she'd calmed sufficiently, he dipped one of their cups in the hot water and made her drink.

"What is it?" Ursula wiped at her mouth. Her lips still tingled.

He sniffed, then tipped it back.

"Not as good as the bourbon back home, but pretty damn fine." He made a clucking of approval. "Brandy. And not the cheap sort." He looked at her incredulously. "You forgot this was in there?"

"It's not mine!" Ursula pressed her fingers to her temple. "I mean... it's for emergencies."

"If you say so, lil lady." He gave her another of his winks.

Ignoring the provocation, she returned to the task and alighted on

a bottle—too small for alcohol, though the contents were dark. Tentatively, she held it to the light.

“Syrup of figs.” Rye squinted, reading the label. “Isn’t that good for —”

Ursula shoved it back again. “My last charge. A spoonful every morning.” She returned to rummaging. There was bound to be something useful.

Her fingers found something metallic. A small tin! Opening it, Ursula smiled. She’d been right. Definitely tea. She gave it a sniff. An unusual blend—rather smoky. Lapsang Souchong?

She held it out to him. “It’s an acquired taste. Very relaxing in the evening.”

Rye lowered his nose and sniffed cautiously. “But it’s—” He rubbed a pinch between his fingers, looking bemused.

Before she could stop him, he’d reached into the bag himself and drawn out something made of wood. It had a long stem with a bulb at the end.

“You smoke a pipe?” He raised an eyebrow.

Glaring, Ursula snatched it away. “A lady’s handbag is sacrosanct,” she retorted. “It’s not for—invasion.”

God help her! She’d be struck down at this rate.

In fact, Ursula hated the acrid smell of tobacco smoke but why shouldn’t Miss Abernathy indulge. “We all have our vices.” She smiled tightly, trying not to show her disappointment over the elusive tea.

The bag contained many of the usual things—safety pins and a sewing kit, a newly laundered handkerchief, a pocket watch, Epsom salts, a jar of balsam.

With satisfaction, she located the rest of Miss Abernathy’s chocolate and three toffees in their wrappers.

“Not bad.” Rye gave her his lazy grin again. “But no coffee, huh?”

“It’s not the sort of thing women tend to carry about...” Ursula sighed. She really would have loved a cup of tea. Would the toffees dissolve?

The very bottom of the bag was sticky with the remnants of confectionary long-since sucked, but there were the unmistakable edges of a book. Bound in dark blue leather, it was pocket-sized, the title embossed in gold:

Ursula leafed through the first few pages, her brow furrowing. She'd received something similar from her grandmother on her eighteenth birthday, just before she was enrolled with Monsieur Ventissori and was obliged to have her "coming out".

She didn't know where her volume was; stuffed in a box somewhere, surely. Hers had been very dull—unless you were riveted by tips on how to throw the perfect luncheon party.

Still, she supposed it might be useful to her, under current circumstances. She'd have to check the chapters on how to address correspondence to various members of the peerage, and conventions of seating precedence. Such topics were bound to be included in a book of this sort.

Miss Abernathy's bag had turned out to be rather a let down—apart from the bar of Fry's. She stretched out her legs towards the stove, letting it warm the soles of her feet. Ladylike behaviour be damned. He already thought she smoked a pipe and secretly swigged spirits; a flash of ankle was hardly likely to make much difference. Besides which, once he'd delivered her to the castle, they'd never see each other again. He was charming in his way, but she didn't suppose his relatives mixed in the same circles as the laird.

It was probably for the best. He already knew too much about her. Once she reached Dunrannoch, she'd need to act her part far more thoroughly.

She'd put up her hair only hurriedly before going to the dining car that morning. With her rush to disembark the train, then the snow and everything that had happened, several strands at the back were falling down, and the rest had to be a mess. She took out the pins, running her fingers through to unsnag the tangles. It didn't help that her hair had gotten wet.

The room was warming up nicely though. Once dry, she'd curl it round her fist and pin it back into a bun at the nape of her neck.

"Here. Try a sip o' this." Rye had been busy while she perused the book. Both cups were filled to the brim. "There's a dash o' brandy to liven it up. Seein' as we might call this an emergency. Just sip it slow."

It smelt surprisingly good and the taste wasn't bad, with the hot

water mixed in.

Ursula took another mouthful. The heat travelled downwards in a most pleasant way.

“You can call me Ursula, if you like.”

Resolving to be nicer to him, she handed over a piece of chocolate. After all, he'd been true to his word. He hadn't tried to molest her. Rather, all his actions had been considerate.

From the deep recessed window, Ursula watched the whitewashed landscape fading to grey as the sun disappeared.

On the whole, it was a good thing they'd stumbled into one another. She might otherwise still be trudging through the snow, ending up who knew where.

Chapter Seven

A bothy, on Rannoch Moor Early evening, 13th December

THERE WAS NO AVOIDING IT. They were stuck there, together in the bothy, until the mist lifted and the snow let up.

They ate the rest of the chocolate and drank more hot water laced with brandy. Though her head was a little fuzzy, she was feeling more at ease than she had in a long time.

It had grown dark, the only light coming from the wood burner.

He'd slipped outside for a while but was now settled cross-legged by their fire, looking as if he sat on the ground all the time.

Perhaps he did.

He nodded towards the door. "I checked on Charon—gave him some of our water. It's still snowing, thick n' heavy. No sign o' the moon."

She came to sit beside him. Not on the chair but on the floor, pulling her knees up to her chest and gathering her skirts close round her. Making more room, he scooted over, giving her the prime spot, right where the fire glowed hottest.

Clearing her throat, she said, "What is it you do, in Texas?"

He didn't answer right away, surveying her through half-closed eyes, as if weighing up how much she'd be interested in hearing.

"I work on a ranch with near ten thousand head o' Longhorn cattle. Three times a year, we drive a couple thousand to the railroad in San Antonio."

"That sounds like hard work."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But also quite exciting."

That smile; his mouth, quirking up on one side.

“There’s nothin’ like spending the night in the wide, wide open, with nothin’ between you and the stars: Orion, Cassiopeia, Scorpius... and Ursa Minor, o’ course. Named for you, lil bear.”

Ursula hoped it was dark enough to conceal the flush creeping through her. It was his voice—that long, slow drawl. That and the way he was looking at her.

“You shouldn’t call me that.” She attempted a reproving look. “I’m Ursula or Miss Abernathy.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am.” He tipped off his hat then settled it back, staring at her still from behind its rim.

He didn’t look sorry.

He was laughing at her; she was certain of it, but she was determined to keep their conversation civil.

“What else do you miss?” she asked. “Your family I suppose.”

Again, he took a moment before answering. “Most everythin’, truth be told—but my dog especially.”

Her shoulders relaxed a smidge. Here was a subject they could talk of without her feeling awkward. She’d had a dachshund some years ago and had been thinking of purchasing another. Once she came into her money, she’d do just that. She could have five if she liked! There would be no one to say she couldn’t.

The thought brought her a wave of pleasure.

Her current situation wasn’t what she would choose, but it was an adventure of sorts, and it wouldn’t be for long. Soon, she’d have the financial independence to make her own decisions.

“What breed is he, your dog?”

“A blue and tan Lacy.” Rye gave her a genuine smile now—one that had nothing to do with teasing her. “Helps herd the livestock. He’s smart as they come, and loyal with it.”

“All dogs are loyal, aren’t they?” Ursula sighed. “More reliable than people on the whole.”

“It’s like the story of Argos.” Rye moved his weight to one side. “You know it, right? After twenty years o’ his master wandering, he was the only one to recognize him.”

He’d read *The Odyssey*? Of course, why shouldn’t he? They had books in Texas, just like everywhere else.

Rye continued. “That poor dog’d been neglected all the time Odysseus was away. He was unloved, weak and full o’ lice, but it dint

stop him waggin' his tail on his master's return. He lacked even the strength to walk over to him, and Odysseus couldn't go to him for fear of discovery, but Argos showed he was loyal. Content at last, the old fella lay down and died, and Odysseus couldn't do anything but wipe away his tears—not wantin' his enemies to see and guess who he was."

Ursula couldn't help but notice that Rye's eyes were glistening.

"The bond between a dog and his master puts most human loyalties to shame," she said softly. Perhaps it was the firelight, or the brandy from before, but she felt softer altogether, as if she was letting go of something that had been wound tight inside.

"Same with horses." Rye nodded. "Take Charon there, the Hanovarian I was ridin'. He wouldn't look at anyone when I first came. Since he threw his master, no one's wanted anythin' to do with him. It's a shame, pure and simple, but Charon and I are gettin' along just fine. He's been starved of affection is all."



RYE LEANT FORWARD. The room had toasted up nicely but he opened the stove to add more fuel, poking at the embers to stir up the flames.

She was resting her chin on her knees, looking at him, her eyes wide; hazel green with amber flecks, and lashes tipped in gold. It had been her eyes he'd noticed first, when Charon had brought him near on top of her, almost knocking her down. They'd given each other a fright—no doubt about that.

He'd been foolish, setting out when he could see mist rolling down the hills. As he'd saddled the horse, Campbell had warned him against it, but he hadn't been able to face a whole day inside. There were too many women at Dunrannoch. He wasn't used to it—all that chatter about not much at all.

Lavinia hadn't laid it out for him explicitly but it was obvious what they had in mind, and he could hardly blame them. Dunrannoch was their home. It was only natural they'd want to safeguard their place in it. His grandfather was tenacious all right, but he wouldn't see out too many more years.

Rye had known the deal. Coming over here, taking on the mantle that could have been his father's, he'd a duty to continue the line—

and that meant finding a wife.

Or being provisioned with one.

He'd only been at Dunrannoch a couple of weeks but, already, he was being backed into a corner. Not that they weren't amenable, those cousins of his: Fiona, Blair, Bonnie, Cora and Elspeth. All dark haired and blue-eyed and pretty as porcelain dolls. As far as he could tell, there wasn't much to choose between them. Perhaps that was the problem. It felt like picking a shirt from a whole pile stitched just the same.

Damn! He was an ungrateful son of a bitch.

Of course, he'd planned to settle down one day and raise a brood. He just hadn't realized it would happen so quickly. Any other fella would've been feeling like a kid in a confectionary shop; instead, he'd only been feeling trapped.

Until now.

Until Miss Ursula Abernathy, sitting there with her honeyed hair all loose about her shoulders, and those dainty bare feet, pale as milk. One long, thick ribbon of satin caramel curled down one side, reaching over the curve of her breast, all the way to her waist.

He'd a yearning to find out how soft it was but he'd made himself sit far enough away that he wouldn't overstep the boundaries. As it was, he'd have to spin a tale to keep her reputation intact.

He couldn't make out if she was flirting with him, with that velvety look in her eyes. When her nose wasn't wrinkling in disapproval, she sure was pretty.

He'd no idea what she was thinking right now.

Nor what she'd say when she worked out who he was.

He hadn't lied. Not exactly. He just hadn't wanted to tell her—not yet. In case it changed how she acted towards him.

And though he might not be telling Miss Ursula Abernathy the whole truth, he was darned sure she was holding a few things back herself.

They sat for a long while, drinking the last of the brandy, saying not much at all. Rye tried hard to keep himself from staring. She'd closed her eyes, tilting her head on one side. Her lips were pale pink and petal-plump, parted in just the right way for kissing.

When riled, she was prickly as a cactus—but kissing her would smooth that out some. That, and holding her close, convincing her

that she was safe—that nothing bad could reach her.

“You’re tired, little bear.” He pushed back a lock of hair from her cheek. “You should get to bed before y’ tump over.”

Drowsy, she opened one eye. “Where will you sleep?”

“Right here. I’ve slept on rougher ground. I’ll be fine.” Even as he said it, he was thinking of how he’d like to curl up behind her and tuck her into him. He wanted her close enough that he’d be able to smell her hair.

If he were honest, he wanted the roundedness of her behind pressed up against him too, but he shoved that thought away quickly. She trusted him, and he wouldn’t do anything to make her regret that.

“Come on now.” He got her under the arms, raising her up.

He shouldn’t have given her the last tot of brandy. She wasn’t used to liquor.

Reaching the wooden cot, she lay down at once, tucking her knees up. It couldn’t be too comfortable; the horsehair mattress was losing its stuffing. He laid the rough blanket over her and she said nothing but, as he stepped away she reached out one arm, her fingers brushing his lower thigh.

“Keep me warm.”

“You want me to hold you?” His voiced came out cracked. He knew it was a bad idea but God help him, he was only human.

She nodded and rolled over, leaving space for him. Not much, but just enough. If he turned in the night, he’d pitch right out and onto the floor.

He adjusted the blanket, making sure her feet were covered, then slipped alongside. He only hesitated a moment before putting his arm over her shoulder, making her snug in the crook.

The rest of him he kept apart from her, but she pushed back, as if by instinct, so that her thigh and her cold little feet sought his. Even through her numerous petticoats and layers, he could feel the warmest part of her, fleshy, rubbing against his groin.

He groaned.

Couldn’t she feel it? The almighty cock-stand she’d given him?

Apparently, she could, for she sighed and wriggled, but then her breathing slowed.

The brandy sent her straight to sleep.

Rye smoothed her hair and moved up the bed a little. He couldn’t

help the erection in his breeches but he'd at least be gentlemanly enough to stick it into her back rather than the cleft of her buttocks.

It was a good hour before he drifted off, dreaming of wide-open plains and a horse saddled beneath him. He was riding hard, heading into the haze of the desert, towards something he couldn't quite make out. Something waiting for him in the far-off distance. Something, or someone.

Chapter Eight

Early morning, 14th December

URSULA WOKE SHIVERING.

She was alone in the truckle bed and the fire had almost gone out, the embers in the stove glowing only dimly.

Where was he?

As she sat up, there was a horrible stabbing through her brain.

Good God!

She raised her hand to her forehead. It wasn't hot, or bleeding—just dizzy and sore. And her mouth seemed to be full of sand.

Oh for a cup of Earl Grey!

Gingerly, she lowered her toes to the floor. Someone—Rye of course—had draped her stockings of the day before at the end of the bed, and put her shoes nearby. Lowering her head to reach her feet brought on the jagged spike of pain so she leaned back, contorting herself to avoid further infliction.

Slowly, she stood up, taking small steps to the table, upon which her coat lay. It was dry, thank goodness.

He'd left a cup of water for her and, eagerly, Ursula drank it down, though its coldness made her shudder.

The addition of the liquid to her insides brought about a sudden awareness of her bladder and, heavens to goodness, there was no chamber pot! If she wanted to relieve herself, there was only the pan they'd used for boiling the snow—or she might manage with the cup.

She tried to gauge its capacity. No—it would have to be the pan; and best to do it quickly, before Rye came back.

Of course, he would be outside—perhaps answering the same call of nature, or seeing to the horse. It must be ravenous, poor thing. Although her stomach was jumping about, Ursula rather thought she

was too. The chocolate hadn't gone far in filling her up and she'd had nothing else since breakfast on the train.

That thought brought an anxious tightening to her belly. Could she really go through with this? They'd have found Miss Abernathy before the train reached Fort William, surely. There might be a story in the newspapers. How long before something reached Dunrannoch and they discovered she was an imposter?

Ursula felt sick.

But it was all nonsense. Of course it wouldn't be in the papers. She hadn't been murdered. She was simply an elderly lady who'd passed away, quietly.

Ursula had only to keep her head. She'd been altogether silly to leave the train as she had. What had she been thinking? She might have been with Daphne by now.

But it was done, and here she was, and why shouldn't Dunrannoch be as good a place to hide-out as any. If she only kept a cool demeanour, she could pull off what was required.

It was certainly preferable to having stayed in London with her vile uncle.

Having utilized the pan, Ursula slipped on her coat. She'd nip outside and empty her offering, then give it a rinse in the snow.

Opening the door, she was struck first by how dazzling the sky had become. The clouds had gone entirely, leaving an expanse of brilliant blue and, though still low on the horizon, the sun was shining brightly.

It was hard to believe the mist had ever existed.

The snow, however, was another matter. It must have long-since stopped falling but it lay deep outside—almost to her knees, and drifting deeper either side of the door. She could see where Rye had pushed his way through the powder, making a channel which led off to where he'd stabled the stallion.

Damn!

She could hardly throw the pan's contents from where she stood. He'd be bound to see the result. Unless she did so and then scooped some snow to cover over the tell-tale yellow.

As she was pondering the best approach, there was a deep, rumbling groan from just beyond the threshold—a lowing, throaty, bovine bray that concluded with the appearance of a huge, shaggy

head in the doorway.

The pan seemed to leap from her hand at the same moment as she let forth an almighty scream. The monster, undeterred, pushed its nose forward.

Ursula screamed again, although more with surprise than horror. The beast was an alarming shade of orange and its horns were certainly fearsome, but it was only a cow.

“Out!” She shoved back against its wet snoot. “Off! Go! Skidaddle!”

“Ursula! You alright in there?” Rye’s voice drifted over from somewhere behind the cow.

“Yes. Absolutely fine.” She gritted her teeth.

“A grand dame of a critter, ain’t she?” He gave the cow a slap across the behind, followed by another, making the creature turn its head and shamble round. Another prod and it shuffled off through the snow, lowing disconsolately.

When Rye came into view, he was holding the pan. “Were you throwing this?”

“Of course not! I was just...” She scowled. “It doesn’t matter. Just give it to me!”

“Keep your petticoats straight.” He gave her a grin. “We should move out while we can. Snow’s too deep for them to send the carriage. Train’ll be coming in about now anyways. We can say you came in on it and I found you waitin’. No-one’ll be any the wiser that we spent a glorious night together.”

“We did no such thing!” A flush of heat rose to Ursula’s cheek.

He raised his eyebrows. “You don’t remember?”

Ursula frowned. She was certain nothing had happened but she’d been very sleepy. He’d promised to be gentlemanly, after all, and everything she’d seen of him so far seemed honourable.

“My apologies, Miss Abernathy.” He must have realized her anxiety for he stepped forward and touched her shoulder. “I’m just teasin’. Your virtue’s intact. I kept you warm; that’s all.”

“Of course.” Ursula smoothed down her skirts and shrugged off his hand. “I knew that all along.” Her tone was more clipped than necessary.

They’d overstepped boundaries in the forced intimacy of the night and, for that, Ursula blamed herself.

It might have been the pounding in her head, or the

embarrassment she was feeling, or anxiety over what awaited her that day, but Ursula felt a hollow nausea as he helped her back onto the horse.



A FLOCK OF CROWS ROSE, cawing above Castle Dunrannoch.

It loomed sheer from the white expanse of the moor—a forbidding edifice of granite, its crenellated towers and sentry walks surrounding a central gate. Far off, to the north and west, mountains soared upward, snow-topped and formidable.

The castle didn't look as if it would have a great deal of comforts, and Daphne's warnings came to mind, of draughty corridors and fireplaces that refused to draw. Ursula could put up with many things, but she hated being cold. The idea of visiting Daphne at her own castle residence had seemed rather a lark. Gazing up at the fortress before her, Ursula felt altogether differently.

This was where she'd be spending the festive season—not in London, with the gaiety of shops and colourful street illuminations and every sort of fancy to tempt one. And not with her father.

No one here meant anything to her; nor she to them. It was a sorrowful thought.

Meanwhile, an awkwardness had fallen between her and Rye. He'd said barely a word as they'd drawn closer to the castle, passing through the snowy moorland landscape.

"I s'pose it'd be frowned upon for you to arrive at your new place of employ with my arms around you."

She couldn't see his face but he squeezed his elbows inward, making her aware of how closely she was tucked into his chest.

She nodded. It was good of him to think of it.

"I'll let you ride in while I walk beside." In a single, fluid motion Rye dismounted, taking the reins to lead Charon from ahead.

They entered under the iron portcullis, its spikes set high above the arching gate. Ursula almost expected it to come rattling down, some force having divined the false pretences under which she was invading these ancient walls, but none barred their way.

Someone had shovelled the snow into great piles, to leave the main courtyard accessible; Charon's hooves clattered loud upon the cobbles.

Rye guided the stallion towards the stables. "He's about ready for some hay. I'll see to him before..."

"Yes, of course. I'll be fine from here."

The fresh air had lifted Ursula's headache somewhat. She unhooked her feet from the stirrups and accepted his hands upon her waist, helping lift her down. He held onto her slightly longer than was necessary, looking at her mouth all the while. The bizarre thought came that he might kiss her and that, if he did, despite everything, she wouldn't stop him. But the moment passed and he stepped back.

Embarrassed, Ursula cleared her throat. "It was very nice to meet you." Without raising her eyes to his, she held out her hand for him to shake.

He gave a nervous laugh, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Likewise, Miss Abernathy—and I hope you'll forgive me..." His voice trailed off. His teasing demeanour had passed and he looked regretful.

A stable lad was already coming out to them.

It was time to part.

Ursula looked around the courtyard. While the exterior of the castle had arrow slits rather than true windows, the interior walls boasted tall panes of leaded glass. Anyone might be watching. She couldn't tell.

Already, they might have formed an unfavourable opinion of her, watching her and Rye together.

On the far side, a door opened and someone in staff uniform stood waiting for her.

"Goodbye then." She took the bags and turned her back.

It was time to become Miss Urania Abernathy.

Chapter Nine

Castle Dunrannoch *Mid-morning, 14th December*

STAMPING HER FEET, Ursula shook off the snow.

“This way, Miss Abernathy.” The housekeeper, Mrs. Douglas, did not smile; nor did she offer to help Ursula with her bags.

It was hardly the warmest of welcomes but, of course, she wasn’t a guest in the traditional sense. She was a servant of sorts. Mrs. Douglas, no doubt, considered herself superior.

The corridor was most certainly for servants’ use, being narrow and dark. Ursula followed behind. Mrs. Douglas’ silvered hair had been pinned so tight into its bun, Ursula wondered how the older woman could bare it. It was some people’s way though, she knew, to take pleasure in a little stoic suffering.

It appeared that electricity had yet to come to Castle Dunrannoch, for Mrs. Douglas carried a lantern. They made their way to the end of the passage and up a twisting stair, the lamplight revealing worn-down steps and rough stone walls. It was no easy task to carry her bags and ascend but, at last, they emerged onto an upper passageway.

“This is yours.” Mrs. Douglas pushed open a door half-way along. Light filtered through three slim openings in the outer wall but only dimly, despite the bright sunshine of the day. They looked to be five feet thick, the slits deeply recessed.

No fire had been lit, though there was a basket of peat and some kindling. She’d have to see to that herself.

The chamber smelt damp but the bed looked comfortable—boxed on three sides and with a curtain for the side facing the room. Embroidered prettily with cruet flowers and intertwining vines, it matched the coverlet. The single armchair, though it had seen better

days, had been likewise adorned with an embroidered cushion. A wardrobe and table—upon which stood the customary pitcher and jug, were the only other furnishings.

“I’ll wait while you tidy yourself.” Mrs. Douglas gave a disapproving sniff. “The countess is in the morning room and will see you as soon as you’re presentable. Don’t take too long about it.”

“Of course; thank you.” She was aware of how rumpled she must look—her hair especially. Ursula reminded herself to smile. It wouldn’t do to get on Mrs. Douglas’ bad side.

Quickly, she changed into a skirt of plain green wool with matching jacket. With her hair repinned, she hoped she’d do.

Returning down the steeply spiralled stairs, they took a different direction at the bottom, stepping through into the cavernous hallway of the castle. The doorway they’d used was concealed within wooden panelling, becoming invisible once closed behind them. Here, the staircase was much grander, of the same dark oak, sweeping majestically to a half-landing before splitting off to either side.

The ceiling, high above, was similarly panelled, while the walls were covered with dusty tapestries, their threads coming loose along lower edges. The floor was cold flagstone, devoid even of a rug. From the far side, Ursula heard conversation. Someone laughing.

That was more like it. Not everything in the castle could be veiled in dismal gloom.

Mrs. Douglas opened the door and ushered her through.

The woman who rose to greet her was undoubtedly the countess. Though it was barely eleven in the morning, Lady Dunrannoch was resplendently dressed in purple silk, with ruffles of black lace at her neck and cuffs. Expertly coiffed, her pure white hair was set off by droplet jet earrings. She cut a striking figure. Clearly, she’d been a great beauty in her time, carrying herself with the bearing of one accustomed to admiration.

The room meanwhile, bore none of the austerity of the entranceway. Here were signs of the Yuletide season, for wreaths of bright-berried holly and twining ivy, spruce and pine swagged the rafters and mantelpiece.

A huge fireplace filled a portion of the inner wall, its grate stacked high and producing a considerable amount of heat, before which lay a rather despondent looking wolfhound, its head down on the rug.

Every available section of wood panelling had been adorned with the head of a stag, and there were perhaps fifty in all, encircling the room, looking down on the assembled women of the family, the faces of whom were turned to appraise the newcomer.

Lady Dunrannoch inclined her head, peering at Ursula with slight puzzlement before collecting herself to make introductions and Ursula found herself obliged to drop multiple curtsies.

“The Dowager Countess,” began Lady Dunrannoch.

Of most ancient years, the lady in question—hunched in her chair and wearing a dress out of fashion these forty years—gawked beadily at Ursula before returning her attention to a plate of cake upon her lap.

“Lady Arabella Balmore and Lady Mary Balmore—widows to my dearly departed step-sons, and my step-daughter, Lady Iona.” They stared at Ursula with interest, the two Lady Balmores sharing a furtive glance with eyebrows arched.

“And my five granddaughters, Ladies Fiona, Bonnie, Cora, Elsbeth and Blair.” The young ladies varied in age from perhaps sixteen to twenty.

“Lady Iona’s son, Cameron, is attending to business in Pitlochrie but you’ll meet him soon. The earl, sadly, is recovering from a head cold and confined to his room at present.”

“Do have a seat, Miss Abernathy.” The countess indicated a space on the sofa opposite, upon which was a liberal sprinkling of orange hair.

The ginger cat sitting at the countess’s feet paused from licking its paw to give Ursula a look of disdain.

“Some tea? I expect you’re gasping for a cup after your arduous journey. Really most kind of you to come at such short notice.”

The countess turned to the maid standing to one side. “More hot water, Winnie.” She waved her hand at the platters set upon various tables about the room. “And shortbread. See if Mrs. Middymuckle has any of her drop scones for us, if you please.”

“Thank you.” Ursula accepted a mince pie. Being quite ravenous, she took a large bite but, brimming with hot sultanas, it burnt her mouth, causing her to splutter.

Two of the younger girls tittered.

Lady Dunrannoch merely added a lump of sugar to her own cup

and stirred vigorously.

"I hope you won't be too uncomfortable here, Miss Abernathy. We're rather lacking in modern conveniences—still using oil lamps and candles, since we haven't the electricity here. There's no telephone of course, though we go to town every few weeks or so. You can post letters from there, or send a telegram."

Producing a sardine from her sandwich, she reached down to offer it to the cat, who accepted with utmost daintiness, its sharp, white teeth closing around the morsel.

"McTavish has a delicate constitution." The countess beamed down at the generously proportioned cat, now wiping its whiskers on her skirts.

She gave a tinkling laugh.

"It was a condition of my marrying the earl that he have decent plumbing installed, so we don't want for hot water, at least. Apart from that, Castle Dunrannoch is little changed since the days of Robert the Bruce. He's said to have stayed here, you know, in 1306, shortly before his crowning."

The dowager stirred, looking up from her fruit cake. Her voice rang out with remarkable force, her eyes suddenly blazing. "Hosted by Camdyn Dalreagh, the fourth of his name, descended from the original Wolf of Dunrannoch, whose ghost walks among us still." She leant forward, her gnarled fingers grasping the armrest of her seat. "The curse is upon us! Beware the bagpipes! Each clansman shall meet his death!"

"Now, now, Flora! Enough of that." The countess patted the old woman's hand, then turned to Ursula with apologetic eyes. "The dowager sees the supernatural in everything. Of course, there's no denying that the castle has a grisly history—bodies holed up in the walls and what have you, but there's a chair on the upper passageway that she declares is possessed by the spirit of her old Pekinese. She leaves out a tidbit on the cushion every night and swears blind it's the spectral visitation that polishes it off."

McTavish stretched and yawned, then leapt to sit on the Countess' lap, looking decidedly smug.

"As for the curse, it's all nonsense. Lyle McDoon, being a lecherous old reprobate, was refused the hand of Camdyn's youngest daughter, and vowed that every male heir of the Dalreagh line would perish an

untimely death.” She rubbed McTavish’s ears. “Of course, ‘untimely’ is a bit vague. The earl is nearly eighty, after all. As for the bagpipes, it’s said that Camdyn plays them on the battlements on the eve of one of the clansmen meeting his end.”

She looked over at the Lady Balmores, both of whom were looking rather pale. “Forgive me, my dears. A sensitive subject, I know.”

“Now, Miss Abernathy.” She turned again to Ursula. “I must say that you’re considerably younger than I was led to believe. Lady Forres indicated that you’d many years’ experience.”

“Ah well. Actually, I’m thirty-eight. I just look rather younger.” Ursula bit her lip. Truly, God would strike her down for the lies she was telling. A bolt of lightning was sure to come down the chimney and smite her on the spot.

“Goodness me!” exclaimed the Countess. “Another day, you must tell us your secret.”

With eyes downcast, Ursula selected a liver paste sandwich. She’d save some ash from the fire and draw on a few wrinkles before she next joined the family.

“And what an unusual accent you have, Miss Abernathy. Which part of Scotland did you say you’re from?”

Ursula gave a nervous laugh. “Oh, my accent?”

Clearing her throat, she emulated the rhythms of the countess’ own gentle lilt. “It comes and goes. For my work, you see, I need to soften my native brogue. Our seat is to the south but I haven’t ever lived there. My father having married against the wishes of his family, we’ve moved about rather a lot.”

“Ah, a love match.” The countess nodded. “Such as between the earl and myself. Second marriages are advantageous in that respect, though our union came too late for me to provide dear Dunrannoch with more children. A man may remain virile to the end, but we ladies ripen younger on the vine.”

She looked wistfully towards the fire. “Fortunately, Dunrannoch married me without expectation of our passion bearing fruit.”

One of the Lady Balmores coughed loudly and offered Ursula the plate of macaroons. “I believe you were most recently with Baron McBhinnie, of the Kilmarnock McBhinnies? A most respected family.”

Ursula felt the colour rising to her cheeks. She really must guide the conversation onto something through which she could weave

some semblance of the truth. “Ah yes, the McBhinnies! But it was my previous family that I vouch to know best—the Surrey Arringtons. Three young ladies all most keen on music and riding.”

“Indeed.” Lady Balmore eyed Ursula over the rim of her teacup, looking as if she didn’t believe a word of it.

The countess cast her eyes over the assembled party. “My darlings, if you’ve finished, might I have some time alone with our guest? Fiona and Bonnie, would you escort your great-grandmother back to her room. And, Cora, perhaps you’ll find young Lord Balmore and ask him to join us. I must introduce him to Miss Abernathy, and we can discuss her various duties together.”

With a flurry of skirts and cups clicked upon saucers, the room emptied, so that Ursula was soon alone with Lady Dunrannoch.

The countess set down McTavish and moved to take the seat next to her.

She spoke in a confidential tone. “I want to confide in you Miss Abernathy, to ensure you appreciate the unusual nature of our situation.”

She passed her hand over her forehead. “I’d almost given up hope of us finding the earl’s third son, Rory. It was a day of sadness when I received the telegram informing me of his passing. But one of joy also, since it contained news that his son would take his rightful place in this family. The Dalreaghs have lost so much—” She broke off, her eyes glistening. “Brodie and Lachlan—they weren’t my own, but I helped raise them. Their deaths have been so hard for us to bear.”

Pulling out a handkerchief, she dabbed at her eyes. “I’m sure you can see the way of things. I have five granddaughters, Miss Abernathy, and I’m eager to arrange a betrothal to our new Lord Balmore. It may seem a hasty desire, and marriage to one’s cousin is not as usual as it once was, but I feel we should waste no time.”

Ursula was rather taken aback.

Does she intend the child to make a promise of betrothal to one of those girls? Could such a thing be binding?

The countess sat a little more upright in her chair, assuming a more businesslike manner. “The young fellow has great potential, but his manners are lacking. He is, without doubt, a Dalreagh, but he lacks the necessary refinement. I wish to rectify this in time for our festive cèilidh, and shall be encouraging him to make his choice on

that very night. You'll do all you can, I hope, to ensure a smooth transition for him."

Ursula could not hide her surprise. It all seemed highly irregular.

At that moment, the door opened.

"Ah, and here he is! Our darling boy!" declared the countess.

Ursula twisted round to cast eyes upon her charge and almost choked on her own tongue.

The man standing before her was no child, nor a gangling adolescent. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His hair was far longer than was fashionable for a gentleman, thick and curling at his collar and, though he'd changed his clothes, he'd not yet shaved, the stubble dark on his jaw.

Moreover, he wore no jacket, no waistcoat, nor a tie—only a linen shirt and moleskin breeches, the bulge of muscle evident on his upper arm and thigh.

To her horror, Ursula found that her pulse was racing.

His eyes twinkled as he walked towards them. He gave his grandmother a kiss upon the cheek and bestowed another on Ursula's hand.

"Well, Miss Abernathy." His lips curved in a half-smile. "It's a true delight to have you here."

Chapter Ten

Midday, 14th December

URSULA ROLLED up her clothes and shoved them back into her luggage. Her mind was made up. She wouldn't stay another moment.

She'd had to sit there, listening to Lady Dunrannoch detail her duties, while Rye—or Lord Balmore as she was now supposed to address him—gave her that brash smile, his eyes crinkling up, no doubt having a good laugh at her expense.

The story he'd told her in the bothy hadn't exactly been untrue of course, but he'd omitted all the salient details—and he'd let her ramble on, digging herself into an embarrassing hole.

The situation was insufferable.

She needed only to return to the platform and wave down the next train to pass through, reverting to her original plan of visiting Daphne. There must be several through the day, surely?

With a sigh, she sat on the edge of the bed. Impulsiveness had gotten her into this mess; perhaps it would be wise to wait until the next morning—at least she knew the time the early train crossed the moor, and the light seemed to be fading already, despite it being only midday.

Ursula passed her hand over her forehead. She hadn't intended for everything to become so complicated. Most certainly, it would have been better if she'd never met Miss Abernathy.

One thing was for sure; she had no intention of carrying her bag again. She'd give it to Mrs. Douglas and leave her to distribute the contents.

It was the sensible thing to do but the thought of it made Ursula feel callous. Miss Abernathy had been kind, truly. Pulling the bag onto the bed, Ursula unsnapped the clasp. Perhaps she'd keep something as

a token. Her hand fell on the flask that had contained the brandy and she took a sniff.

Had it only been last night? She'd enjoyed hearing his stories, then sitting in companionable silence, watching the flickering of the fire. Later, the comfort of him curled to her back, his arm across her chest.

She threw the empty flask back into the bag.

It didn't change anything.

He was still insufferable.

And then, there it was again—the book: *The Lady's Guide to All Things Useful*. The flyleaf bore an inscription: *To my darling Urania, from your ever-loving sister, Violet — December 25th, 1855.*

The sister on the Dorset coast.

Would they have managed to contact her yet? To let her know that Urania had passed away? Probably not. They'd have been able to identify Miss Abernathy from the booking name on her overnight compartment but there mightn't be anything else among her possessions to even indicate she had a sister.

As it was, there was no address book in Urania's handbag. No doubt, she knew any address of importance by heart. She, Ursula, would have to take the initiative. She wasn't sure how, as yet, but she'd find a way. There couldn't be too many women by the name of Violet Abernathy living along that piece of coastline.

She'd write, letting Violet know that Urania had been thinking of her.

Ursula flipped through the pages: recipes, cures for ailments, rules of etiquette, and the usual pithy nuggets of advice.

The chapter on "Honesty" fell open, as if it had been often called upon.

To thine own self be true, as the great philosophers say. However, a lady knows when she must speak the truth and when diplomacy is the better course of action. Gifts should be professed to be exactly what one would wish, and a friend should be complimented on any achievement with which she is clearly pleased herself. Our own opinion need not unfailingly be expressed, to spare the feelings of others.

In most matters, nonetheless, honesty should be observed in more than spirit. To tell falsehoods may seem expedient but they are

likely to trip one up, and to cause more difficulty in the long run.

Well, Ursula could hardly argue with that.

While Rye had been frugal with the truth, she'd hardly been liberal with it herself. And the tales she'd spun Lady Dunrannoch; if she stayed, it would be all she could do to keep those straight.

She'd keep the book. Perhaps, she might send it on to Violet—if she managed to locate her place of residence.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a rap on the door and, before she had the chance to rise, the heavy oak pushed open.

"You!" Ursula leapt to her feet.

The person standing in her doorway, having to bend to avoid the upper lintel, was none other than Rye himself.

"I've come to apologize." He had the decency to look sheepish, at least. "I mean to say, there are things I should've mentioned."

Ursula felt a surge of anger. She'd had enough of being told half-truths. "You shouldn't be here. I'm only 'staff' but I still have a reputation. Did anyone see you come up?"

"But I'm only—" He looked confused for a moment then shook his head. "No. No one knows I'm here."

"That's something." She barged past him to close the door then stood with her back to it.

Rye turned to face her. "I knew I ought to tell you, but I never could find the right moment."

Ursula folded her arms. "I'm sure it was far too amusing, having me ranting on. Why would you want to stop me?"

"It wasn't like that, Ursula." He pushed his fingers through his hair. "You made me laugh, sure, but I wasn't laughing 'at' you."

The look he gave her was earnest. In her heart, she knew he was telling the truth but her pride remained wounded.

"Since I won't be staying, it doesn't matter." She stepped to one side, grasping the door handle. "I took the position on a whim and it was a mistake. If there's a cart or something to take me, I'll depart tomorrow. Now, I think you should leave."

"Whoa there." In one stride, he was in front of her, his palms on her shoulders. She was brought up short, confronted by the sheer physicality of him, smelling faintly of perspiration and sandalwood—more strongly of horse and leather and peat smoke. And his hands

were so warm. She remembered how it had felt to have him lie beside her through the night, how it had felt to have him hold her while they were riding.

“There’s no need for you to go anywhere. We can forget all this, can’t we? Move past it; start again?”

She didn’t know why he was making such a fuss. It couldn’t matter whether she stayed. There were enough other people to show him the things they were expecting her to teach him.

Part of her wanted to agree to anything he asked. The way he was holding onto her made it difficult to think of leaving, but she shook her head. “You weren’t completely honest with me—”

He interrupted her before she could finish. “And you’re telling me that you have been?”

“I d-don’t know what you mean.” Ursula looked upward, into eyes that told her he wasn’t fooled.

“Well, Miss Abernathy, I can’t say that I understand what’s going on here, but somethin’ doesn’t quite add up—what with you thinkin’ you were comin’ up here to teach a child.”

“A simple misunderstanding.” Ursula shrugged away from Rye’s hold. “I was distracted when the initial letter of request arrived. There’s nothing more to it.”

“Uh huh?” Rye folded his arms. “So why is it I get the feelin’ you’re running away from somethin’?”

“Running away?” Ursula frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous. I came here to do a job.”

“And what’s with the accent you’re usin’ with my grandmother?”

Ursula had no answer for that—or none she cared to share with him.

He raised one eyebrow. “Look, I’ll be honest with you. Then you can decide how honest you want to be with me.”

“If you must.” Mrs. Douglas was sending up some lunch on a tray at one o’clock. She’d just need to be sure Rye was gone before then. Meanwhile, she might as well warm up the room. Bending to the grate, she fiddled with bits of kindling, only to find him kneeling next to her.

“I promised my father and I’m determined to see it through. I’ll be learnin’ everything about the cattle ’n’ the estate. I’ll take good care of the folks that rely on this place for their livelihood and—”

“—you’ll wed as your family see fit.”

“A wife will keep me on the straight and narrow, I guess.” Rye shrugged.

And put the necessary babies in the nursery for you. Ursula snapped a twig in two, throwing it on top of the others.

“It’s not how I imagined doing things, but they’re stuck with me, and I’m not what they were expecting. I need to make a few concessions.”

“But you’ve left behind everything you grew up with to come here. Isn’t that enough?” She sat back on her heels, glaring at him. If she felt indignant about it, why didn’t he?

“I told you, little bear; I’ve promises to keep.” He looked suddenly weary.

“And five young women lined up to flutter their lashes at you!” The words were out before Ursula had the chance to catch them. She bit her lip. He’d be thinking she was jealous, which was ridiculous. She’d only met him the day before; they didn’t know each other.

Neither did his girl cousins, of course, but that wasn’t going to stop him from marrying one of them.

“And I’ll be the one doin’ the choosing.” He spoke softly.

“That’s what they want you to think.” She picked up a larger piece of kindling, attempting to break it over her knee. “They don’t know the first thing about you. They employed someone to make you fit in. Doesn’t that irritate you?” After several failed attempts she threw the wood aside, sucking at her thumb.

They’ll polish down your rough edges to turn you into something they think acceptable. They’ll dictate your clothes and manners and change your accent if they can—that honeyed drawl that’s part of who you are. And they’ll marry you to their own to keep everything within the status quo.

“I need you, Ursula. I need you to help me, so that I can do what’s right.” He brought his hand over hers. “Show me what it is they’re expectin’ and I’ll do my darndest not to let them down.”

What other people were expecting? He was right that she was on the run—and it was other people’s expectations she was running from.

Yet here he was, running towards them.

His situation, of course, was different from her own. Ultimately, he’d have charge of his destiny in a way she never would.

She pulled her hand out from beneath his and brought it to her lap. He didn't need to know how she'd ended up here, nor what she planned for her own future, but she could give him a few days.

"All right. I'll stay." She rubbed at the splinter in the pad of her thumb, keeping her eyes down. "But don't ask me anything else."

Leaving, he paused on the threshold and she glanced up then, but he was only checking that the passage was clear.

He didn't look round again but she heard him as the door clicked shut.

"Fair enough, little bear."

Chapter Eleven

Early-afternoon, 15th December

BLACKENED WITH CENTURIES OF SOOT, the vaulted rafters of Dunrannoch's banqueting hall stretched high above, leading the eye to a minstrels' galley occupying one end, large enough to accommodate a small orchestra.

It wasn't hard to imagine a gathering. The room had been built for that purpose—to bring together every member of the household in communal festivity. The cavernous fireplace would have blazed high, while long tables and benches would have filled its length and the hall would have resonated with the chatter of several hundred voices.

Now, the emptiness echoed.

In preparation for the Yuletide cèilidh, the staff of Dunrannoch had begun to hang greenery and a small fire had been set at one end of the hearth, producing a modicum of warmth to supplement the cool winter light entering through the hall's windows of leaded glass.

It was here that Ursula was to teach Lord Balmore the deportment required of a gentleman. So far, they'd addressed the conventions of cutlery and glassware, as well as various other table etiquette—from how to use a finger bowl to the correct manner in which to pass a bottle of port. Where Ursula had been unable to recall the details herself, Miss Abernathy's little guide had lived up to its title.

After a luncheon of venison pie, a hurried conference with MacBain, the butler, had apprised Ursula of the customary toasts of Burns' Night, and other festive occasions unique to the Scots. She'd located a volume of poetry by the great man for Rye to study at his leisure.

Ursula entered the banqueting hall to find him already waiting, bending over something on a side table. As he did so, his shirt pulled

tight across his back. His physique spoke of his working life, there was no doubt about that, and he'd rolled up the cuffs of his shirt to his forearms—as if to take up a scythe, or manhandle a sheep for dipping. She hadn't forgotten how easily he'd lifted her, helping her into the saddle and out of it the day before.

It seemed that someone had brought in a gramophone and he was leafing through a stack of recordings—frowning at some, peering at the typeface upon others. She observed him remove one from its case and place it upon the turntable, winding the handle upon the side before lowering the needle. The shrill, wailing drone that emerged had him jumping back in horror.

Ursula rushed forward to lift the needle.

“Bagpipes.” She held up the case, indicating the picture upon the front. “They’re good for accompanying the Highland Fling and such—country dances, you know.” She moved her feet in the semblance of a jig, to demonstrate. “But the clans used them for centuries in battle, since you could hear them over the din of all the fighting.”

“No kidding.” Rye shook his head. “I don’t know how anyone’s meant to dance to this. More like a bag o’ wilcats fightin’ each other than any music I ever heard.”

“It’s all part of your heritage.”

“Are you ribbin’ me, Miss Abernathy?” Rye cocked an eyebrow.

“Certainly not, Lord Balmore.”

“Call me Rye, please; you know that’s m’name.”

Removing the offending bagpipes, she flipped through the other recordings, selecting an alternative. “You’ll have to get used to it. Officially, everyone will refer to you as Balmore from now on—or Dunrannoch, when you come into your grandfather’s title.”

Rye frowned. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used t’that.”

As the first strains of the music rose, she directed him into position, placing his right hand on her waist. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Helping you get used to new things. Now, I’m going to teach you to waltz, your lordship.” She placed one hand in his, and her other on his upper arm—an appendage, she noted, that was hard with muscle.

With a grin, he wrapped her more firmly. “If it means holdin’ you like this, I’ve no objection.”

For a moment, she wanted only to remain still and savour how

close they were standing; the way his arm was encircling her.

His fingers crept round farther, and he was staring hard into her eyes. He wasn't just teasing. She felt the force of something altogether more powerful. She'd never felt like this before, but she had an inkling of what it was.

The fluttering of her pulse might have made her think she was falling in love—or some such ridiculous notion—but she wasn't a ninny. They'd only just met. No one fell in love overnight.

This was physical attraction, pure and simple; some animal craving for which she was hardwired as much as he was.

She might have limited experience—that was to say, almost none—but her father had given her full reign over his library. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* had taught her a good deal.

Determined to remain in charge, she pushed away. "You aren't throwing me in the hay—or whatever it is you usually do with women. You need to maintain a respectable distance."

Rye wiggled his eyebrows but did just as he was told, creating the requisite space between them. "Yes, ma'am. Rules are rules. Can't have us forgettin' them and goin' wild."

Going wild? She couldn't begin to imagine; and now certainly wasn't the time.

She cleared her throat, and fixed her gaze somewhere around his clavicle. Everything would go easier if she avoided looking him directly in the eye.

"The waltz from *Swan Lake*—by Tchaikovsky. The idea is to float around the floor, in a fluid and elegant manner, moving in waves to the count of three. It's really very simple when you get the hang of it." For the next few minutes, she made him follow her feet. "Step and lean, and slide and rise. That's it—as if you're making a repeating box with your feet. Anti-clockwise around the room, making small extra turns as we go."

He grasped quickly all that she showed him. By the time she'd given the gramophone a fifth cranking, they were twirling at full speed. Really, it was quite wonderful. Rye seemed to be a natural, for all he'd never tried before.

She'd danced with any number of men during her season and none had made her feel like this—as if she could stay in their arms for hours, letting them spin her in circle after circle, to music rising and

swelling.

As the waltz came to its crashing, tumultuous conclusion, he brought her to a stop by the window, both of them a little short-winded and laughing with pleasure.

“You did—very well.” Ursula beamed, catching her breath.

He offered a bow to her curtsey and another of his grins. “You’re an excellent teacher.”

“Thank you.” She was surprised at how much satisfaction it gave her to hear his praise. “Of course, there’s a lot more to learn yet. For instance, you shouldn’t dance more than once with the same lady, unless you wish to show particular favour.”

He’d suddenly stepped closer again. “And here we are, turning about the room over and over.”

“Yes, well...it’s perfectly acceptable while you’re learning.”

“Is that so?”

The way he said it, his drawling voice low in her ear, made it sound anything but.

Remember, it doesn’t mean a thing. He has five would-be brides waiting in the wings, and you’re nothing at all—just the hired help. Good enough for a quick squeeze, but don’t fool yourself into thinking it means anything else.

Shaking her head clear, she went to pour them some water.

On her return, he was looking upward at a bunch of mistletoe hanging in the alcove.

“It has sacred powers you know.” Ursula handed him his glass. “The old Druids used it in their ceremonies, thousands of years ago, and this time of year was when the plant was said to be most potent.”

“Interesting.” Rye drank down the water and craned his neck. “Potent for what exactly?”

“Healing illness, protecting against nightmares; predicting the future, even.” Hurriedly, she relieved him of his glass, setting both on the little seat under the window.

She happened to know that the ancient Greeks had gathered mistletoe as well—for their festival of Saturnalia and for marriage ceremonies—because of its association with fertility, but she wasn’t about to discuss that.

He reached up, plucking one white berry off the sprig.

“You shouldn’t; it’s unlucky just to pull them off. The only way to

remedy it is to..." She paused, suddenly embarrassed. She'd been about to—almost had—invited him to kiss her!

"What's that, Miss Abernathy?" He bent down, so that his lips almost brushed her ear. "Is there somethin' else I need to know?"



IT WAS BAD OF HIM, he knew, teasing her like this, but it was too darn fun to resist.

He'd been a perfect gentleman, just as he'd promised, but there was a time for a man to show a woman what he was feeling—regardless of propriety.

And he'd been waiting all day for this, watching that sweet mouth of hers as she explained a hundred and one things he could barely see the reason for. It was all to make other people feel comfortable, she'd said, as well as setting an example—but he couldn't see the tenant farmers caring if he knew which fork was right for eating fish, or how he should be handling his napkin.

There was something else he did care about, and that was letting her know she was the best thing to have happened to him since he'd landed in this goddam place. He'd no idea if she'd been kissed before. It was hard to tell. She was all sorts of feisty but innocent with it: the way her face lit up when she laughed, and how the blush came roaring every time he brushed his fingers against hers.

But there was something mischievous, too—and not altogether ladylike, for someone who was supposed to be a teacher of etiquette.

As to whether she wanted him to kiss her, there was only one way to find out and that was to take the initiative. He'd cup his palm to that peach of a cheek and graze his lips against hers—going gently, of course.

She'd have the chance to get all indignant and stop him, if that was what she wanted. He only hoped he'd read the signs right, for once he started kissing her, he'd an idea it was going to be damn hard to stop.

They were already standing near hip to hip, so it was easy as pie to slide an arm back around her waist.

He surprised her alright, going by the gasp she gave as he pulled her in, but he'd been right about her being ready for kissing.

He let their lips touch just a little, to get acquainted, and she

sighed right into his mouth. Tugging those petal-soft lips with his own, he had her arching into him. And, when he ran his tongue inside, she opened right up. She wasn't fighting him and she wasn't prickly. She was pliant and willing and pressing close.

She was trembling in all the right ways and kissing him back as if it were the only thing she wanted.

There was nothing about Miss Ursula Abernathy that was telling him to stop. On the contrary; she was waving a big old flag emblazoned with the word "go".

Deepening the kiss, he remembered what it had felt like to lie beside her all night, to feel her warmth and listen to her breathing. That scent of hers, too—talcum powder and roses, and a little hint of something musky.

He groaned with the pleasure of it and clasped her tighter, thinking about the whole damn sweetness of what she was offering.

A woman didn't melt like this unless she wanted a man to make love to her.

Yes, sir.

Miss Abernathy might talk of propriety but she was brimful of passion—and he was the lucky man to have discovered it before she even realized the fact herself.

Chapter Twelve

Early-evening, 16th December

ALL NIGHT, she'd tossed in her bed, thinking about Rye Dalreagh.

Thinking about that head-spinningly delicious kiss, and how good it had felt, being embraced by all that manliness.

She was pretty certain that one, if not both, of his hands had somehow ended up cupping her bottom. There may even have been a moment in which he'd pushed his thigh between hers and, rather than slapping his face, she'd let him do it!

To top it all, she knew she'd pulled out the back of his shirt—with the sole intent of laying hands on his bare skin.

She was a hussy!

A brazen strumpet!

A jezebel in the making!

She was also an utter idiot. Because the kiss hadn't meant anything; none of it had.

When they'd come up for air, he'd gasped, "I don't think we should —" and then the female contingent of his family had squawked into the room.

Fortunately, at least, it seemed her floozy-like display had gone unwitnessed. If the countess had an inkling of Ursula's carnal proclivities, wouldn't she be thrown out on her ear? As it was, she'd merely summoned Ursula to the gramophone and asked her to get it going again, so that Rye might show them all he'd been learning.

All he'd been learning!

She'd been forced to stand and watch while his five cousins took him for a spin and, clearly, Ursula wasn't alone in harbouring shameless tendencies. Hers were not the only eyes admiring Lord Balmore's buttocks as he executed his turns. The women were like cats

licking their chops over a particularly juicy bit of fillet.

Declaring herself delighted, the countess had promised they'd assemble again the following morning to teach him some cèilidh dances—those Scottish jigs in which you swapped partners at every corner and most of the places in between.

Rye had gone along with it all, and she could hardly blame him. He'd told her all about his idea of duty—of his intention to live up to his family's expectations and marry as they directed. It was only a waiting game.

Her lips—and other tender parts—had been nothing more than an *hors d'oeuvre*.

Come the afternoon, young Cameron had returned and whisked Rye off to discuss some new treatment for removing ticks from cattle—or something equally revolting—leaving Ursula to her own devices.

Retiring to her room, she'd brooded in maidenly frustration, wondering for the forty-seventh time what she was doing at Castle Dunrannoch. Even settling to a book seemed troublesome. What would Miss Abernathy have advised? To have her fun before the clock chimed midnight, or to pull herself together and behave with dignity?

She pulled out the little book again—*The Lady's Guide to All Things Useful*. It had some queerly titled chapters, broaching subjects she would hardly have expected.

Flicking through, Ursula alighted on something about husbands, then seduction. Did the two go together? Surely, you didn't need to worry about seducing your own husband? There was some old wives' rubbish on aphrodisiacs and how to prevent pregnancy. Ursula gave a snort of derision but, on further consideration, made a small fold at the corner.

She scanned down the pages and her eye alighted on the word "lust". That was more like it. What was one supposed to do when in the throes of some unreasonable passion? Take up cold baths and knitting? Pray for guidance?

To lust is to desire without rational limit. It is a headstrong, galloping beast which marks not the rein. A craving of the blood for the forbidden. A darkness most alluring when the stakes are high. To lust is to lose oneself, but to find something, too—that part of us which wishes to tear at life and devour it. Without passion, what

are we?

All things in moderation, as the adage goes—including moderation itself. There is a time for recklessness and the unbridling of desire. Only choose well the object of your cravings, and remember that bright flames are apt to quickest burn.

Well, that was a surprise. Ursula read the section a second time. These sorts of books didn't generally encourage one to give in to anything sinful.

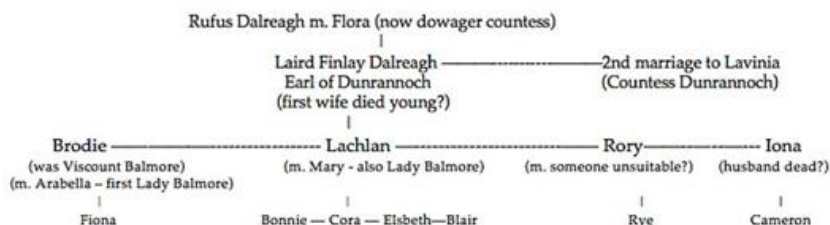
Perhaps, with her time at Castle Dunrannoch being so short, she'd better get started on a little of that devouring, before Lord Balmore was permanently apportioned to someone else's plate.

The notion of normalcy had departed when she'd boarded the Caledonian Express, so she might as well embrace it and behave like a true adventuress.

As a starting point, she needed to dress for dinner. She'd been so irked the previous evening that she'd pleaded a bad head and taken a tray in her room, but the countess was adamant she join them tonight, and the gong wouldn't be far off.

Ursula only hoped she'd remember everyone's names correctly, and how they were all related. There were so many generations and step-children...and how many Lady Balmores were there? It was tricky keeping it all straight. She'd quizzed the maid who'd brought her hot water, but there were still some gaps in her understanding.

Taking a piece of writing paper, she began jotting down all she could remember. She'd pop the mnemonic in her reticule and could take a peep if things got too confusing.



Certainly, there were no difficulties in choosing what to wear, for

the restrictions of her luggage had permitted Ursula to pack only one change of skirt and jacket, three shirtwaists, and a single evening gown—one of dark blue silk with a low-scooped neck, embellished finely with midnight lace. She'd been confident that Daphne would lend her anything else she needed.

Still, the dress was flattering. She might sit at the Dalreagh table without feeling too humble.

Having contorted herself with the rear buttons, Ursula had begun pinning her hair—sighing for the absence of Tilly to help her—when there was a scratching at the door.

She pulled it open a crack and heard a faint feline mewl. A small but determined paw pushed the door wider and McTavish manoeuvred himself inside. Brushing past Ursula's legs, he made a leap for the bed, stalking over the nightgown she'd laid out for warming, and settling himself bottom-first against her pillow.

She noticed then that he'd something in his mouth.

Something limp and scrawny, and very much dead.

With a satisfied air, McTavish deposited it on the coverlet.

"Urgh!" Ursula made no bones about shooing out the cat, closing the door firmly against McTavish's protests.

Bringing the oil lamp closer, she peered at the thing on the bed—a scrap of brown fur damp with feline drool, four tiny paws pointing ceiling-ward and a very long tail.

What was she to do with it? She might move the corpse to the peat basket and ask one of the maids to remove it for her. Certainly, she didn't intend to leave it where it was.

She was just reaching for the tail, when the mouse leapt up and burrowed under her nightdress.

Ursula gave more than a squeak!

The mouse, meanwhile, was quivering in fright, its whole body trembling.

"Oh dear," said Ursula. "You were only pretending—and now what shall I do with you?"

The mouse looked back at her with beady eyes, twitching its nose between layers of ribbon and lace. It was quite a pretty mouse, truly, with soft little ears.

"You need to go outside." Making herself brave, she scooped it up and went to the window.

That was no use at all. The glass didn't open. Besides which, it was simply too cruel. She could hardly throw the poor thing from the fourth floor. It had suffered quite enough.

With a sigh, she put it in her reticule. Downstairs, she'd release it from the outer doors.

Chapter Thirteen

A little later in the evening, 16th December

THE PORTRAIT DOMINATED the far wall—a devastatingly attractive man in full kilted regalia, complete with cascading lace ruffles on his shirt and glinting broadsword in hand. He'd the same dark, curling hair and chiselled jaw as Dunrannoch's newly arrived lord. The same air of sensual promise. The same dangerous mischief in his eyes.

Sipping from her sweet sherry, Ursula peered at the plaque on the frame: Dougray Dalreagh, thirteenth Earl of Dunrannoch. It had been painted in 1683.

Clan blood clearly ran strong.

"Ah, Miss Abernathy! 'Tis a pleasure to welcome you to the castle. I trust we're making you comfortable." The voice behind her was a little rasping but there was no doubting it as that of Dunrannoch's laird.

Ursula caught her breath. Finlay Dalreagh lacked the strength to hold himself fully upright in his wheeled chair but he bore the same piercing look as the portrait. Even in his weakened state, she recognized the bearing of a man who was accustomed to being master of those around him.

"Forgive me for nae meeting you afore tonight." He fastened his pale eyes upon her—the same grey as Rye Dalreagh's. "Age is both a privilege and a curse." He smiled weakly. "I hadnae thought to see another Yule season, but here we are."

Ursula curtsied low, managing with scarcely a wobble.

"I must give ye my thanks for taking on my grandson at such short notice." The laird gave a rascallish half-smile. "I've nae doubt he's a handful, being woven from Dunrannoch yarn. Ye have only to look at him to ken that!"

The countess, hovering not far away, kissed her husband's forehead. "No woman minds a handful when it's so handsomely packaged, my love."

Ursula averted her eyes as the earl gave his wife's behind a playful pat. "'Tis your sweet heart that keeps mine young, Lavinia."

"Flirting with all the pretty ones, sir?" The unmistakable Texan drawl of Lord Balmore carried towards them.

"Ha! There's the young scallywag, seeing well to the Dalreagh tartan, too."

The laird spoke nothing but the truth. It was the first time Ursula had seen Rye in much else but his shirtsleeves. Now, he wore a full kilt of dark russet accented with green, and a sporran of beaver, his broad torso encased in an evening jacket, its buttons gleaming.

Though the hair still curled at his neck, his jaw was clean and smooth. Without his stubble, he looked almost a different man, though the glint in his eyes spoke of his wild streak, regardless of the shaving.

Until now, she'd hardly believed Rye might manage what he intended. Not that his accent mattered, nor whether he remembered to butter his bread on his plate. It had simply seemed that he was too much of the outdoors to be polished up and put on display.

As it turned out, he was proving her wrong—and she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it.



THROUGHOUT DINNER, Ursula had ample opportunity to admire Rye further, and to observe the fluttering lashes of Fiona and Bonnie, placed either side. A stream of inanities floated across the table, the girls exclaiming at tales of lassoing steers and cooking rattlesnakes over a campfire.

"Did you really converse with Indian savages?" Lady Bonnie gasped. They seemed surprised that Lord Balmore hadn't been scalped on the spot.

Ursula heard him reply. "The indigenous people prefer to be called by their tribal names." She wanted to listen more but, with the dowager countess on her left and Lady Iona on her right, Ursula was drawn into a conversation on the most effective remedies for chilblains.

They slurped their way through Cullen skink, followed by some rather grey-looking mutton. Ursula pushed it round her plate but it continued to lie apathetic, congealing snugly between two boiled potatoes. Even the cloutie dumpling, rich with dried fruit and spices, failed to rouse her appetite.

Rye, meanwhile, asked for a second helping.

At last, the interminable meal was over and the ladies rose.

“They’ll only be a few minutes behind us, Bonnie dear.” Ursula heard Lady Balmore chivvyng her daughter as they entered the drawing room. “Now, don’t be afraid to—you know...” She tugged a little at Lady Bonnie’s neckline, pulling the yoke to the edge of her shoulders.

“Do you think he’s interested, Mama? I can’t tell. He seems to look just as much at Fiona as at me, as if he can’t decide.”

“Of course he likes you.” Lady Balmore sniffed. “Now, get yourself seated at the piano and play something melodious—none of your *doaty* dirges!”

Close behind, the other Lady Balmore—Arabella, wasn’t it?—seemed to be taking a different tack with her own daughter. “You’re being far too obvious, Fiona. Less smiling if you please. Men like to hunt rather than be chased. In fact, a certain aloofness can work wonders; ignore him all together if you like.”

Fiona looked bewildered and wandered over to turn the pages for Bonnie.

With a sigh, Ursula helped herself to the coffee that had been put out on the side.

No sooner had she poured than Lady Balmore was at her elbow. “How thoughtful of you, Miss Abernathy. If you might bring us each a cup that would be most kind.” With a curt nod, she lifted the saucer from Ursula’s fingers and went to take a seat.

Pursing her lips, Ursula did as she was told.

The laird it seemed, was weary, requiring Lady Dunrannoch to retire with him, leaving Cameron and Rye to join the would-be harem.

“How are ye getting along?” asked Cameron, coming to sit alongside Ursula. “Surviving the vipers’ pit?” He chuckled to himself. “I dinnae envy my cousin, being thrown in with these fighting o’er him.”

Ursula buried a smile beneath the rim of her cup.

She was more than happy to let Cameron cheer her up a bit. He was a little on the skinny side for her taste, but he might do to make Rye jealous. Despite heading towards her, Lord Balmore had veered away as soon as Cameron sat down, taking an armchair by the fire instead, next to the dowager.

“You’re a saint and no mistake, choosing to spend your Hogmany up here in the wilds of Rannoch—in this *dreich* weather, and all for the sake of this *crabbit* lot. They’re ne’er happy unless they’ve something to moan about.”

Ursula couldn’t help laughing. It was nice to have an ally—even though Cameron was a mite younger than her and didn’t seem to hold sway over anyone. Since being introduced, he’d been nothing but friendly.

“They’ve not been so very *crabbit*—and I don’t mind the weather when we’re warm inside.”

“You’re too polite by half, Miss Abernathy. I only hope your good manners rub off on these *tumshie* cousins o’ mine.”

“*Tumshie*?” Ursula raised an eyebrow.

“Like turnips o’course. Although, to be fair, sometimes, they’re more like plain tatties.”

“That’s a dreadful thing to say!” Ursula laughed again. “On behalf of my gender, I must protest.”

“In that case, I shall shut ma blethering and offer ye a wee dram. Grandfather keeps the best locked away in his library, but I know where the key is. I’ll be back in two ticks with something to warm ye better than coffee.”

No sooner had he departed than Ursula noticed Lady Arabella Balmore staring at her with marked dislike. Ursula fought the urge to poke out her tongue.

Rye was also looking over, and with a wistful expression. No doubt, it was exhausting having a bevy of women tussling over one. She’d overheard his two younger cousins vying to guess his favourite song, only to discover that he’d never heard of any of the ballads they suggested.

He rose from his seat and wandered over, the wolfhound following. It put its head in his lap when he sat down again, gazing up with devoted eyes.

Even the dog is enamoured with him!

Ursula rolled her eyes. "A new friend?"

"You miss your master, don't you, big lug." Rye rubbed behind the wolfhound's ears. "I've been letting Murdo sleep on my bed." He grinned in his usual way. "I don't see why anyone should mind if I don't."

"Well, if it's the best company you can find..." Ursula smiled sweetly and opened up her reticule to extract her pot of salve.

Only too late did she remember.

The little mouse had sat inside cosily all through dinner, so still and quiet that she'd quite forgotten him. Now, he made a leap for the carpet.

With a squeal, Lady Iona jumped onto a chair.

The piano lid crashed—as the tiny varmint skittered up and across the keys.

Murdo began to howl and, from two rooms away, McTavish caught the scent and barrelled in to join the fun.

Both cat and mouse shot at high speed, scampering between petticoats and slippers feet. Cups and saucers went flying and, as Cameron entered the room, so did the whisky. The screaming had reached a fever pitch when Rye made a dive for McTavish.

Ursula, meanwhile, opened her reticule wide and the mouse, sensing its best interests, bounded back in.

Nothing more needed to be said. Ursula whisked from the room, with Rye in pursuit.

"Don't let it out again until I've locked this one away!" Held unceremoniously aloft, McTavish spat and wriggled.

Having witnessed the commotion, the butler had presented himself and, with a nod at the main doors, opened them in readiness. A cold blast of air wafted into the hallway.

"I'm sorry but you're far too much trouble," chided Ursula, whispering into her bag through the cracked clasp. She took three steps outside and gave the mouse its freedom, sending it scuttling through the snow.

It was at that moment that she heard them—bagpipes!

Was someone on the roof?

She craned her head upward. It was impossible to tell, but it sounded as if the music were coming from above.

It was certainly too cold to be standing about outside—either

listening or playing.

Darting back into the hall, she near collided with Lord Balmore.

From the open door of the drawing room, the dowager's voice carried out, full-laden with doom. "Beware! Beware! 'Tis Camdyn, playing on the ramparts."

Staggering to her feet, she outstretched her gnarled finger, pointing into the hall, directly at Rye. "'Tis the Dunrannoch curse, come to claim the next heir!"

Chapter Fourteen

Mid-morning, 19th December

IT WAS a relief to finally get outdoors. Rye's feet were itchier than a buck's in springtime. He'd never liked being cooped up inside and, these past days, he'd had about as much as he could take.

All those yapping women! They were driving him crazy.

It wasn't just the talk about sashes and gloves and how puffed their darn sleeves ought to be. It was this business about the curse. As far as he could tell, it was a load of balooey. His uncles' deaths had been tragic alright—but the result of some old loon's jinx upon the place?

At worst, someone was playing tricks—for their own amusement, or to see if he was the sort who scared easily. They could suck their teeth 'til they turned blue before he gave them that satisfaction.

Striding across the castle courtyard, he breathed deep, letting the fresh air clear his head.

Besides that nonsense with the curse, there had been Lady Dunrannoch to placate. She'd been discreet in pulling him aside after all the waltzing, but there was no duping her. The others might have been too caught up in themselves to see him and Ursula spring apart, but Lavinia knew a clinch when she saw one.

Of course, he'd taken the blame onto himself, telling the countess he'd jumped on Miss Abernathy without any sort of provocation. A woman had to guard her reputation and he wouldn't be the cause of Ursula losing hers.

He'd been raised to know the difference between right and wrong and he'd acted reckless. He'd let his pecker do the thinking and near got Miss Abernathy dismissed for it.

The countess had been mighty good about the sorry business—all things considered—but she'd reminded him that Miss Abernathy was

there with a job to do. The job of making him decent for ‘polite society’, as she put it, and that Miss Abernathy was a decent gentlewoman herself.

She’d put him in his place all right, and reminded him that Ursula deserved better than a stand-up grope, delivered where anyone might walk in and see.

There were to be no more private lessons. The countess would sit in herself where she could, or ask one of his aunts to do so.

The upshot was, he’d had not a minute’s peace the whole time since.

The only consolation was that Ursula looked as miserable about it as he was. Was it wrong that he hoped she might be hankering after another of those sweet kisses and wondering how they might snatch one?

Doggone it! There he went again.

No matter what his blood was telling him it wanted, he was man enough to know when to leave a woman alone, and there was no excuse for him to forget the promise he’d made.

It included taking on one of those porcelain doll cousins. He just needed to work out which one he’d the best chance of falling for—or which of them seemed most in love with him. A few weeks back, he’d thought it would be pretty simple. A matter of time; nothing more.

Now, a whole heap of reasons kept getting in the way—and they all looked like Miss Ursula Abernathy.

As Rye entered the stable, there was a collective turn of heads from the half doors of each stall. Charon gave a whinny at his approach, bending to breathe into his palm.

“You and me, buddy.” Rye rested his forehead against the stallion’s nose. “Ready to stretch those legs and take a ride?”

The stable lad, Buckie, appeared beside him and Rye nodded his thanks at the offer of having Charon saddled up. He could do it himself, of course, but that wasn’t the point. Everyone employed at the castle had a job to do, and part of Rye’s job was to make them feel valued.

Rye took a wander down the stalls, pausing to whisper to each horse.

Only when he came to the last, which was empty, did he hear the muffled sobbing.

“Miss Abernathy?”

She was bundled with a strange assortment of woollens about her neck, and her nose was redder than a pig’s pate in the midday heat.

“You all right in there?”

With a self-conscious snuffle, she gathered herself upright and dabbed at her eyes.

Was she hiding out? She didn’t exactly look pleased to see him.

“I’m fine. Just...” she sighed heavily. “There are the most delicious smells wafting from the kitchen, and they’re putting up the last decorations in the banqueting hall today—for the dance—and raising the Christmas tree. Lady Dunrannoch asked my opinion and I had to tell her the truth.”

“Which is?” Rye raised an eyebrow.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” Her voice dissolved in a wail.

Rye gave a low whistle. “Well, it sounds awful. No wonder you wanted to get out o’ there!”

Ursula gave a choked laugh. “I know it’s silly of me. It’s only that everyone’s so excited, and there’s so much bustle, and, and...”

“And you’re far from your own folks.” Rye finished the sentence for her. “You’re thinkin’ about the people you’d really like to be with.”

She frowned briefly, then nodded. “One person, really.” She sniffed. “My father—but he’s dead, so I won’t ever see him. It’s too late!” Ursula dropped her head, giving in once more to tears.

Rye didn’t need to think twice. He brought his arm round her.

Sometimes, a person just needed holding.

They stood for a while, until Ursula quietened and wiped her cheeks.

“I have to toughen up. I’m not the only one to have lost a parent.” She attempted to laugh. “None of your cousins are out here feeling sorry for themselves.”

“I’m out here.” Rye leant against the stall’s divide.

“I’d forgotten, sorry. I expect you’re feeling some of the same things.”

“More than likely.” Rye gave her his half-smile.

She wasn’t alone in losing someone she’d cared about. That was true. But, he’d a feeling there was more than that making her miserable. Whatever relations she did have, she’d decided to be here

instead. They must be pretty poor excuses for family if she was choosing his over her own.

Rummaging in her pockets, she drew out a fresh handkerchief.

“No pet mice today?” He gestured at her coat.

She looked bemused, so he nudged a bit further. “No scorpions or snakes?”

Her lips twitched at that. “There aren’t any in Scotland—not scorpions anyway.”

“That’s a relief. Though McTavish could probably handle them.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “How about I teach you something for a change—just for fun. We can shake out our manes and let the wind blow through.”

“You’re comparing me to a horse?” Ursula gave her nose a final blow.

“It’s the highest compliment.” Rye took her hand in his own, leading her out to where Buckie had the stallion saddled. “Know how to canter while standing in the stirrups?”

“You want me to do that? On this enormous beast?” Ursula shook her head, laughing.

“Get good enough an’ I’ll show you how to stand on the saddle itself. I did it all the time back home.” He gave her a wink.

“You may be waiting some time—but don’t let me stop you from showing off your talents. I can tell you like an audience.”

As if on cue, another voice called across the courtyard. “Off on a jaunt, Balmore? Care if I come along?”

Rye sighed. It was no surprise that Cameron would hunt them out. He’d been showing far too much interest in Miss Abernathy for Rye’s liking. Not that she belonged to him; he could hardly claim that, but he didn’t know his cousin well enough to guess his intentions.

Despite her bravado, Rye could see Ursula was vulnerable. He wouldn’t stand by and watch his cousin lead her down some merry path. He’d come close enough to doing that himself.

“The sun’s warmed things up a wee bit, I see.” Cameron rubbed his hands together. “It’ll be melting the lighter patches o’ snow and giving the coos a proper feed again—but I wanted to check on those grazing east of the bothy. There’s a lot of clover in the pasture there and it can give them the bloat if they over-eat.”

Rye passed his hand through his hair. “Sounds like we’d best take a

scout over there.” He cast an apologetic look Ursula’s way.

“Here,” he passed Cameron the reins. “I’ll saddle one of the others. You take Charon and I’ll catch up.”

“Brodie’s stallion?” Cameron blanched. “But—is he safe?”

“Charon? Sure he is!” Rye gave the horse’s rump a slap. “I’ve been ridin’ him the whole time. He’s solid as a rock.”

“Not that I’m feart of the animal, o’course.” Cameron gave the horse a doubtful pat.

“Wouldn’t think it for a minute.” Rye nodded to Buckie, that he might bring round another of the horses. He couldn’t help notice the lad was also looking somewhat pale. He’d have a word with Campbell, the head stableman; perhaps Buckie had been working too hard.

With a stiff smile, Cameron brought his boot into the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle.

No sooner had he done so than Charon uttered a full-throated whinny. The stallion reared onto his hind legs, peddling wildly. With a buck, he jumped to the side, throwing Cameron clear out of his seat.

Ursula screamed as the young man flew toward the hard cobbles. His landing came with a horrible thud.

“Dear God!” Rye grabbed at Charon’s reins, attempting to calm him before those powerful hooves came down on Cameron’s prone body. Something had spooked the beast badly, and even the best of horses were unpredictable when frightened.

The stable lad, meanwhile, was backing away in horror.

“None of that, Buckie!” Rye knew he needed help. “Run for Campbell, quickly.”

Ursula was down on her knees already, checking for signs of life.

“He’s breathing, and moving his fingers. There’s no blood. His head looks fine.” She looked up at Rye, her eyes wide with their own terror at what she’d just witnessed.

“What happened?” Cameron raised his chin a little then whimpered in pain.

“You’ve had a fall.” Ursula took Cameron’s hand. “Just tell me where it hurts.”

Despite her fear, Ursula was doing a marvellous job. Rye felt a surge of pride.

“My shoulder,” Cameron gasped. “It’s happened once afore. A dislocation. Hurts like the devil.”

"We need to get it back in the socket." Rye looked from Cameron to Ursula. "Miss Abernathy, can you follow my instructions?" Though Rye had a firm grip on Charon, the stallion was still skittering. He couldn't afford to let him go, nor trust Ursula to hold him.

"I d-don't know." Ursula looked as if she might be sick.

"Please." Cameron was begging now. "I'm afraid I'll pass out."

"You can do it, Miss Abernathy." Rye kept his voice level. "Take his wrist and bring the arm directly upward, then pull it straight."

Ursula stood, taking Cameron's arm and doing exactly as Rye instructed. Cameron gave a ghastly groan and then a sharp cry before falling quiet again.

Gasping with relief, Ursula buried her head in her hands.

All at once, two different doors opened across the courtyard. From one emerged Campbell, who ran to take Charon from Rye's weary arms. From the other came Lady Balmore; Aunt Arabella flew across the cobblestones like a harpy from Hell.

The shriek she gave was most piercing.

"Cameron, my love!" Pushing Ursula out of the way, she fell beside her nephew. "You can't be dead! I won't allow it!"

Rye was dumbstruck. His aunt had never given the impression of caring for anyone in particular. Even her love for her daughter, Fiona, seemed lukewarm.

"How could you?" She turned to Rye with eyes blazing. "You know that horse isn't safe. What were you thinking? It should have been shot after it threw Brodie." Her shoulders heaved in great sobs.

"Your nephew's going to be alright." Ursula ventured toward Lady Balmore. "It could have been much worse."

"Don't touch me!" Lady Balmore smacked away Ursula's hand. "He might have been killed! And it would have been your fault, stupid girl. He would never have attempted getting on that monster if he hadn't been trying to impress you."

Ursula staggered back, her face a horrible shade of grey.

"Now just hold on." There was no way Rye was going to stand by and see Miss Abernathy maligned for something that wasn't her doing. "You're actin' madder'n a steer with a thorn in its side."

"What did you say?" Lady Balmore fell suddenly still.

"You're not thinkin' straight, Arabella. It was an accident, pure and simple."

By now, a small crowd had gathered. Fiona scuttled over to her mother, placing her arms around her shoulders, while Lady Iona came running to her son.

“Let’s get everyone inside.” The countess made her way through. “If Cameron’s had a fall, he’ll be in shock. Best to keep him warm. You’ll help, Rye? Can you carry him? We’ll make him comfortable in the library.”

Rye nodded.

An accident, he’d said.

He just wasn’t altogether sure he believed it.

Chapter Fifteen

Later that morning, 19th December

A HALF HOUR passed before Rye came to find her.

“How is he?” She’d been pacing outside the library, not wishing to intrude. Cameron had enough female relatives to fuss over him.

“Just needs to rest up a week or two, and then take it easy. Everything’ll heal, as long as he avoids climbing trees.”

“Or getting into the saddle of madcap horses.” Ursula couldn’t help the barb. She’d been replaying the scene over and over—of Cameron taking the reins and hoisting himself upward. Charon had stood nice and steady, just as Rye said he would, right up until the moment Cameron lowered himself onto the stallion’s back. Then, all hell had broken loose. Charon had become a different horse entirely.

A muscle ticked in Rye’s jaw. “There’s nothing wrong with Charon. I’m going out to speak with Campbell. See if I can get to the bottom of this.”

“I’ll come with you.” She had to know. She’d been right there when it happened. Rye had invited her to mount the horse before Cameron had interrupted them. It might have been her...



CAMPBELL WAS RUBBING down Charon with straw, speaking to the horse in the same soothing way Rye always did.

Ursula had to admit that Charon was handsome—finely proportioned and well-muscled, not unlike Rye himself. His eyes, dark and soft and full-lashed, followed Rye as he approached. There was devotion in those eyes, even though Rye had only been riding him these short weeks.

“Stay here.” Rye spoke quietly. “Campbell’s likely to be more

forthcoming if he's just confiding in me."

She accepted with a shrug. It was the same with most things, wasn't it? Women were another species, most of the time—not rational enough in men's eyes, or not to be trusted with hearing unpleasant truths. It was one of the reasons she'd always felt that she didn't want to get married. Men tended to want to put you in a box: housekeeper, mother, wife. They didn't want someone who had ideas of their own, or aspirations.

Not that Rye seemed that way. He appeared to admire the fact she, as Miss Abernathy, was making her own way in the world.

Ursula still wasn't sure exactly what her aspirations were—but something worthwhile beyond looking after a man's home. Her father, clearly, hadn't taken seriously her hopes of running his half of the business. He hadn't believed in her, or not in the way she'd wanted him to.

But she could still believe in herself. She just needed to work out where to direct her energies. She was very fond of dogs, and most animals really. Perhaps she could run a home for them instead of for a husband! A home for animals that other people didn't want, or a home from which they might adopt an animal. She'd give that some thought.

There were only seven more days until she came into the first installment of her inheritance; then, she'd have choices.

Wandering along the stalls, she petted one of the mares. Campbell did a good job with the stable. Every horse looked in good condition—bright eyed and sleek coated.

A few minutes later, Rye joined her, his face drawn. "I've told Campbell to saddle Charon again. I'm taking him out—to prove there's nothing wrong with him."

Ursula's heart gave a lurch. "No!" She looked up into Rye's face, needing him to listen. "It might not be safe...so soon after."

"When Campbell removed the saddle, there was a dried thistle head under the blanket." Rye held her gaze.

"Strange..." Ursula frowned. "But I suppose it must happen round here. There are so many thistles; they grow like weeds."

"They do, but I don't think it's so common that they find their way under saddles." Rye passed his hand over his forehead. "Campbell told me he'd only seen it happen once before. He found the same just after

my uncle, the first Lord Balmore, was thrown.”

Ursula’s hand flew to her mouth. What was Rye saying? That someone had meant his uncle harm? That someone meant him harm as well?

“What about the stable boy?” She remembered how scared the lad had looked. “He was the one who made Charon ready for you. What does he say about it?”

“Buckie’s nowhere to be found.” Rye rubbed his chin. “It doesn’t mean anything, of course. The lad’s probably fearful of being dismissed. He’ll turn up later, I expect.”

“He wouldn’t have put the thistle there on purpose, would he?” Ursula worried at her lip. Even as she said it, she knew it was an unlikely theory. What reason would he have to wish harm on anyone in the family. It made no sense.

Rye seemed to agree. None of it made sense. Perhaps the thistle really had gotten under the blanket by accident.

“At least, Lady Balmore can’t make you put the horse down, now, can she?” Ursula touched Rye’s arm. “Not when she hears what caused the stallion to rear up like that?”

“I doubt she’ll think it makes much difference what caused it but, no, I won’t let her hurt the horse. It’s not the animal’s fault. She’s just lookin’ for someone to blame.”

Ursula nodded. She noticed that Rye was wearing a riding coat of tweed today—in shades of grey and moss. It didn’t look new, though it fit him reasonably well. Had it been his uncle Brodie’s, or been worn by the other one—Lachlan wasn’t it? Of course, it made sense for Rye to make use of their serviceable clothing, but something about it made her shiver. It was like stepping into dead men’s shoes.

“If you’re saddling up, I’ll come with you.” The declaration was out almost before she’d finished thinking the words. “Just in case.” A warmth stole through her cheeks. She was acting impulsively again, she knew, but she had a feeling Rye oughtn’t to be alone right now—on the moor, or anywhere else. For all his strength, he needed someone to look out for him.

The frown lines across his forehead eased a little. He brought his palm to her cheek and his lips curled up, giving her his half-smile.

“Sure thing, little bear. I’d be glad of the company.”



IT HAD BEEN QUITE a while since Ursula had ridden, not since early in the summer, on the Arrington estate, but the mare was an easy mount, responding to the gentlest of squeezes to her girth.

They set out in the direction Cameron had spoken about. He'd wanted to check on the cattle, so that was what they'd do.

She thought it would give them some good news to report, that the cows were fine. Except that, as they approached, she saw they were anything but fine.

Cameron had been right about the snow melting down here. Wide swathes of grass had been exposed under the sun's warmth. No wonder the cattle had been feasting. They'd have thought all their birthdays had come at once after having to scrape through the snow with their hooves these past days, revealing one small portion at a time.

There were twenty of the great, shaggy cows in all, and they were all lying prone, like balloons with legs sticking out, their stomachs blown up tight. A couple were kicking at their bellies, but most lay still. It looked uncomfortable in the extreme but the cows were making barely any noise.

"They've been gorging alright." Rye jumped down from Charon and helped Ursula do the same. "See how fast they're breathing, with their necks stretched back and their tongues protruding. They must have been like this an hour or two. The bloat isn't just causing their abdomens to swell; it's putting pressure on their lungs."

"Is there anything we can do?" Ursula looked from one cow to the next. Their eyes were bulging but their lowing was faint—an occasional anxious sound, as if they knew what was to come and had already accepted it.

"There might be." Rye leant over the cow nearest them. "I've only done this once before, but the results were immediate." He was feeling between the cow's ribs. "There's a certain place. If you puncture correctly, you can free the gas. It's not ideal, but it's the quickest solution. I don't know what else to try. There's no time to ride for medicine; they'll be dead before we make it back."

"You're going to cut them open?" Ursula felt a wave of nausea rising. "Won't it hurt them?"

"I've no doubt it will, but it's that or leave them to die." From the look on Rye's face, she could see he didn't like the idea either, but he was doing what had to be done.

"We just need something sharp. I usually carry a knife, back home, but I've nothing in these pockets." He thumped at his head. "Damnation. With all that's happened today, I wasn't thinking about what we'd do if we found the cattle in need of help."

Ursula looked again at all the cows. They had to do something. No animal should die in pain. The moor was their home, but its bounty had caused this. The very place that had provided the cows with fodder had turned against them. It was too cruel.

Turning her face to the mountains, she felt the breeze lifting the loose strands of hair from around her face. The sun was warmer than it had been in days. Truly, the moor was beautiful. She wondered how it would look in spring, and in the summer. Did the hillsides turn mauve with blooming heather, as she'd seen in paintings? How much she'd like to see that, to admire the moorland in all its seasons.

The wind tugged at her felt hat and she raised a hand to secure it, her fingers feeling for the pin that held it in place.

The pin!

Of course. It would be sharp enough, wouldn't it?

Swiftly, she removed it, holding it out to Rye, showing him the very thing that might help them.

He took it from her with a grin.

"Looks like you just saved them, little bear."



BY THE TIME Rye was done, they'd gotten every cow back on its feet. Mostly, the cattle looked disoriented, staggering slightly, clustering together, giving their neighbours friendly licks.

Had they known how close they'd come to death? Such animals were thought to be stupid, but Ursula wasn't so sure. Several of them nudged Rye with their noses, as if giving thanks for the relief he'd brought them.

Finally, the two of them drove the cattle away from where the clover had been exposed, kicking snow back over where they could.

"You did it!" Ursula beamed at him. It had been a marvellous thing

to watch—Rye at work, doing something she'd never dreamed possible. Dunrannoch had struck lucky the day Rye Dalreagh came back to claim his title.

"We did it." Rye wrapped his arm about her shoulders. "You were braver than many a man I've seen, helping get these ladies upright. I couldn't have done it without you."

She knew it wasn't true. He'd done all the work. She'd pushed alongside him, but it had been his strength that had helped the cows gain their legs again.

The sun was already dipping but she didn't want to go back to all the bustle and commotion that had nothing to do with her—to the family life from which she was excluded.

She wanted to stay with Rye. Just he and her. They were a good team. She'd been forcing him to learn a whole lot of nonsense these past days—things he mostly would never need to know, things she'd dredged up from her time at Monsieur Ventissori's Academy. Rye had never once complained. He'd knuckled down because he thought it was the right thing to do.

She might have been teaching him, but there was a whole lot she was learning—and not just about cows.

"What now?" She willed him to look into her eyes and see what she was really thinking.

He pulled her into his chest and touched his lips to her forehead, then down the plane of her nose. She tipped her head back to invite his mouth upon hers. As his kiss truly found her, she let go, opening to every tug and sip, and the gentle intrusion of his tongue.

His arms came gradually tighter, until he was lifting her, resting her behind in the crook of his arms, so that it was she, now, who looked down at him. The advantage of height let her take control of the kiss, and she delighted in it, weaving her fingers through his hair, pulling back his head so that she might look him full in the face. She tasted him everywhere, brushing her lips to his eyebrows and eyelids—to his lashes even. To the coarse stubble regrowing on his jaw, and his mouth. She was falling into him, wanting to be held like this forever.

A kiss like that should never end, but she knew there was more. The way he was holding her—his arms so strong, lifting her up—was making her heart beat fast, heating her up inside, and she had the

strangest feeling; a desire to wrap her legs around his waist and push herself against him.

She'd never read of such a thing. Had never thought of it before. But her body was telling her what it wanted.

Rye.

Chapter Sixteen

Late afternoon, 19th December

THERE HAD BEEN a chapter in that book of Miss Abernathy's, about seizing opportunities and not wasting the life you had. If there was something she wanted, she had to take it, or risk never knowing what might have been.

As she led Rye towards the bothy, she knew what she was doing—as much as it was possible to know. She'd never been with a man before; of course, she hadn't. But she knew she wanted more than Rye's kiss.

She wanted to feel his skin again. She wanted to drag off his shirt and run her hands over his back. She wanted to kiss not just his mouth but his neck and shoulders, and his chest. She wanted to feel the hardness and softness of him all at once, and she wanted his hands on her that way too.

She'd run away to where no-one would find her, and where no-one knew who she was. She'd told herself it was an adventure, in which she got to play at being someone else, and didn't need anyone's approval, except that she wasn't being someone else now. She was being herself.

And she wanted to know what it would feel like to be utterly herself with Rye.

She wasn't hurting anyone. He wasn't engaged yet. He hadn't chosen, although he was going to. Whatever happened here, it had nothing to do with the choices he'd make later.

She wasn't asking him for love. Wasn't asking him for anything but this moment between them. This would be hers. Her decision. Because she could.

Inside, the bothy was just as they'd left it.

He worked quickly to get the woodburner lit, throwing on all the kindling in one go and then heaping up the peat.

She'd already removed her jacket and her skirt, and her fingers trembled over the buttons of her shirtwaist.

Still kneeling by the stove, he looked up, watching her. "You don't have to..."

But she carried on, drawing down the sleeves of the blouse and casting it off, until she was standing in her combination and corset.

"I want you to kiss me again, Rye, and then everything else a man does with a woman."

"Everything?" He looked taken aback.

"I'm not a strumpet—or not until now. I've never done this before." Somehow, it seemed important to say it; for the sake of honesty—although he probably knew already. How could he not?

"I could never think badly of you." He stood up.

"In that case, help me." She turned, showing him the laces. They weren't tight—only pulled as far as she'd been able to manage on her own that morning.

He tugged, loosening them far enough that she could step out.

With her back to him, she paused. His hand was resting on her hip, warm fingers on soft cotton.

"You're sure," he said again.

"I don't want half. I want all of it. I trust you, and I want you to show me."

She was very much aware of him standing behind her—of his breath on the bare skin of her shoulder, where the yoke of her chemise had slipped to one side.

"It's something special, little bear." He brought his fingers to her collarbone, touching very lightly.

"That's why I want it to be you."

"Even though..." His voice trailed off. He knew, she supposed, that he didn't need to say it; not for her benefit. They both knew.

He wasn't going to be hers.

She wasn't going to be his.

Whatever happened, it was just for this moment in time.

And that was fine—because it was her choice. No matter what happened, she'd always have this. It would be her secret, tucked safely from the judgement of others.

She turned around and gave him a smile. “You need to catch up. I’m not taking off the rest until you’ve shown me everything.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With top coat and boots gone, he peeled off his shirt and tossed it to one side.

His chest was just as broad and muscled as she’d known it would be—like the statues in the British Museum, but far from marble cold. His skin was a light brown, marked at the shoulders by the sun. And there was hair on his chest—curling thick like the mane on his head, covering all the way to a dark arrow pointing downward, disappearing within the waistband of his trousers.

Her eyes were fixed there, on that trailing line. She had an inkling where it led to. Not all statues wore fig leaves, after all. And she’d felt the outline of what he kept in his trousers, too—the first time he’d kissed her, and again, outside; something hard that wanted to poke at her belly.

“Keep going.”

She wanted to see it.

He tipped his fingers in mock salute and slowly pulled through his belt. She watched him unbutton the fly, letting the trousers drop. With only his small garments beneath, the outline of his manhood was apparent. It pushed out against the fabric, making a tent in front.

“These as well?” He was teasing, pulling out the waistband and peeking inside. “Are you sure your maidenly sensibilities can cope?”

“Uh huh.” She licked her lips. There was no doubt in her mind.

And then, they were off.

He stood entirely naked, backlit by the fire. The front of his body was half-shadowed but she saw enough to know that he was a prime specimen of man.

The hair sprung thick between his legs, but it did nothing to hide that part of him a man used for reproduction.

She felt hot and lewd, wanting to touch him—was struck by a yearning to rub her cheek over him; not just over the fur of his chest and that flat abdomen but along his thighs and...

Her heart was racing.

Had she really just thought that?

Yes. She wanted to rub her face over his penis.

Not just her face.

She wanted to open her mouth and taste it.

What was wrong with her?

She was depraved, surely.

Except that, looking at Rye, and seeing how he was looking at her, it didn't feel like it could be wrong.

Keeping her eyes on this new part of him, she pulled the ribbon of her chemise and shimmied it downward, then did the same with the ribbon on her drawers.

Suddenly, she was as naked as he, feeling a little goosebumped and uncertain.

Was her body as much a surprise to him? It wasn't the first he'd seen, she expected, but women came in different shapes. What would he think of her, now that she was showing him everything?

Before she had a chance to ask, he stepped closer and answered whatever she was thinking with his hands. Warm and firm, they moved over her breasts, cupping their weight. His thumb and forefinger grazed her nipples.

"Rye." She breathed his name rather than spoke it, and he bent his head to her neck, kissing down to her shoulder and then up again, into her nape and hair.

His kisses, first tender, grew fervent—his mouth and lips and tongue eating her up and all the while murmuring endearments, telling her she was perfect, and that he couldn't stop touching her, that he wanted to taste and squeeze and own every part.

He kissed her mouth again, long and hard, while his hands stroked the arch of her spine and the dimples above the curve of her bottom, and then he brought his lips to the top of her breasts, kissing their softness.

He covered every part of them with his mouth, drawing the peak of her nipple deep inside, then letting it free, gazing upon the bud a moment before pulling it back into the warmth for a second feasting, suckling like a babe hungry for nourishment.

Moving lower, he grazed his stubble over her belly, telling her what he wanted to do—that he was going to kiss her there and make her wet for him.

And then, he was actually doing it, without waiting for her to say no or yes.

Not that she wanted to say no—not to any of it.

He'd fallen to his knees and was breathing through her tangle of

curls, his hands reaching round to caress her behind.

She pushed at his head, giggling. There was nothing there for him to kiss. It was silly. She didn't know what he was doing.

But then he pulled her knee onto his shoulder and brought his mouth straight between her legs, and his tongue was on her cleft.

"Rye!" she gasped, wriggling. "What are you—?"

And then she knew, for his nose was buried in her curls and his tongue was pushing inside her, and it was the most terrible, wonderful thing.

With his hands firm on her behind, he was pulling her onto his face, wanting to do this to her as much as she was enjoying having him do it. She pushed her hips forward and he moaned.

"So beautiful." He was muttering again and holding her tight, drawing the flat of his tongue across that secret part of her and then tickling her with the tip, making her writhe with exquisite, sharp-sweet pleasure.

Right there, where he was teasing her, she was growing hot and restless, melting onto his tongue. He kept pressing and circling, and claspng her in such a way that she couldn't hope to escape from the deep, sweet ache.

Without realising it, she'd wrapped her fingers in his hair and was pushing herself just as hard, panting "No" and then "Yes", and "Oh" and "Yes" again. Something burning bright was coming for her and she didn't know how to stop it. It was bowling her over and tossing her and making her push harder against him.

She didn't know what sounds she was making, only that she couldn't prevent them. His tongue was drawing them out of her, and she was shaking and trembling. And then the burning consumed her utterly and made her cry and tug his hair so hard she must have hurt him, but he only held her tighter.

"Ursula." Her name was rough on his lips. He looked up at her with eyes half-closed but entirely focused.

"I need to be inside you now. That part of myself that's hard, it's all for you. I need to bury myself inside you. It's how a man gives a woman a child, but I won't let that happen. I can stop before that happens."

He was already rising, cupping his arm under her knees and carrying her.

The blanket was still on the bed from the first time.

Gently, he laid her down and kneeled above her.

She couldn't stop looking at that part of him. Where it had bobbed half-upright before, it looked different now: thicker, longer, and wet at the tip.

In the same way that he'd made her wet, she'd done this to him.



BY GOD, she was lovely.

She'd stripped everything away—not just her clothing but her soul, and he was so hard for her, he didn't know where to begin. She deserved to be worshipped.

Not just screwed—which was what the prostitutes in San Antonio had given him. He'd only been a handful of times, and it had all been over pretty quickly. The women he'd lain with had seemed perfectly happy with that—a customer who paid his coin and did what he'd come to do. It had been nothing like this.

He knew what it felt like to enter a woman's body; knew what sorts of noises a woman made when she was liking it, too. But, Ursula was a virgin. Everything that happened between them would be the first time for her.

He'd have to be careful not to hurt her—and to watch himself, too. It was going to be damn difficult, but he couldn't spill inside her. He'd protect her from that, however much his body was telling him otherwise.

He wanted to lick and bite and taste her all the way down and up again, to bury himself balls-deep and pulse his desire into the velvet heart of her—but this wasn't about him. It was about him showing her what she meant to him.

He'd filled his hands with her, making her pant and mewl as he squeezed and tugged—but not too hard.

He couldn't be too rough with her, but he'd been just rough enough. He wanted her to know that he was taking charge; taking charge of her body and her pleasure. She'd asked him to show her what this was about, and he didn't plan to disappoint.

He hadn't been sure if she'd let him kiss between her legs but she'd taken to it without too much embarrassment. Better than that. He

knew where a woman's most intense sensations were and he'd found that place for Ursula. Hearing her moan had been headily arousing. The smell of her, and the beauty of her body, the heat of what she was offering him—all of it was arousing, but most especially the trust she was investing in him.

When she'd come in his mouth, he'd almost spent on the floor, right underneath her.

Now, he moved his weight over her, pushing forward with his hips until the shaft of his erection lay against her cleft.

He groaned into the hollow of her throat.

"I'm ready, Rye. I want you. Don't worry about it hurting. I know it will—but it will be all right. My body's made for this, isn't it—it's made for you."

Hearing her say it tipped him over the edge.

He shifted the angle of his pelvis and his cock, swollen with desire he could barely contain, and found the soft wetness she'd created for him. He drew the broad crown down her cleft, then pushed just the tip inside, rubbing against the swollen part of her. She looked up at him with wide eyes and parted lips.

She trusts you.

He had to remind himself. This wasn't about him; it was for her.

"I don't want to hurt you." No, he didn't—but the ache in his balls was going to rupture him unless he did what he needed to do.

He couldn't hold off any longer.

He wanted to drive his cock into her heat.

He want to thrust home and ride her senseless.

He pushed forward.

Mine.

He sank deeper.

This is mine.

She tensed and gasped—but he was inside her, where it was tight and hot, and soft and—nothing had ever felt so good.



IT HAD HURT. She'd known it would; a sharp burning as he'd entered her.

But it wasn't hurting any more. There was too much slipperiness

for that.

He was sliding into her, moving in a steady rhythm and, despite the chill of the room, she was burning hot.

He was, too. There was perspiration on his skin, making his chest stick to hers, dragging rough against her breasts.

The way he was rubbing against her was exciting, making something build again. Something raw. Something she needed. She was on the edge of it and it was different to what he'd done with his tongue.

That had been tender. Reverential even.

This was utterly carnal.

He was moving quickly, pumping fast, then faster. What had begun slowly sped and tumbled, as if they were racing to some invisible finish line.

She tipped back her head to let him see her and wrapped her legs around his, tipping her hips where he was joined to her. She was aware, suddenly, of all the places in which their bodies were touching. That thought, alone, excited her. That there was nothing between them. He was inside her and she wanted him there.

The heat was growing, as if it would ignite her in a great flash, licking through her belly and thighs and sparking right at the spot where they were joined; a huge, blinding flame of pleasure covering every part of her but centred right there, in the place that was giving him pleasure too.

She dragged her nails over his shoulders, needing him to do just this. If he stopped, she would scream, but her voice already seemed to be doing that. A wave of uncontrollable joy swept through her and she arched into him again.

Suddenly, he was groaning and looking down with a surprised expression, as if he didn't quite believe she was there with him.

“Dear God! Ursula!”



HE THRUST one last time and went still, his face buried in her hair.

His body was humming for her—utterly spent, but fiercely alive too.

What had passed between them had been incredible.

Only one thing was wrong. Deep inside, he'd given her every drop of his release.

He should have been horrified. And, yet, part of him was glad.

How hadn't he seen it before?

He wasn't just attracted to Ursula. He was in love. And telling himself anything else was just plain dishonest.

He'd been so busy thinking what he needed to do to make other people happy, he'd forgotten that he deserved happiness himself. And Miss Ursula Abernathy did more than make him happy. She made his heart sing.

She acted fearless—even when he knew she was shaking with fear, and she was thoughtful—even when nobody else seemed to give her a second thought.

He ought to get down on one knee here and now and beg her to marry him. Nothing else mattered, did it, in the end? He could still do his duty without marrying one of his cousins. He'd make it his duty to find them each a better husband than he could have been.

But, if he was going to propose, he needed to do it right—not on this tatty mattress in a shepherd's bothy, without even a ring to offer her.

He'd get her safely back to the castle and then arrange a meeting with his grandfather. It wouldn't be an easy conversation, but nothing worth having ever came easy.

It was time he stood up for what he knew was right for him—and he wouldn't make his proposal until he'd convinced his family to accept his choice of bride.

If his future truly was here, at Dunrannoch, he wanted Miss Ursula Abernathy to share that future with him. Nothing, and no-one, was going to stand in the way.

Chapter Seventeen

Early-evening, 20th December

URSULA SAT before the fire in her room, brushing out her hair.

She'd known that nothing would be the same afterward. She'd been a virgin and now she wasn't, but it wasn't just her body that had changed. In those moments afterwards, stroking Rye's back, she'd felt an overpowering tenderness.

He'd leaned up on one elbow and looked at her, and what she'd seen had thrilled her.

Because something in him was different, too.

They were both alive and joyous and vibrant, and what they'd shared was like nothing else in the world.

Was it so wrong of her, now, to harbour a secret hope—that what had happened had deeper meaning for them both?

Throughout the day, guests had been arriving for the countess' Yuletide cèilidh and there seemed no-one in the house unaffected by the excitement.

The banqueting hall was dazzling—every surface flickering with candles and a hundred baubles in gold and silver between, their facets catching the glinting light. The Christmas tree was swathed in ribbons and all manner of sweet confectionaries, and boughs of green swung from the rafters.

There was a magical atmosphere within the castle, but Ursula felt a pang at what this night might bring.

Lady Dunrannoch had said she would encourage Rye to select from amongst his cousins. Would there be an announcement then, before all the guests?

Though Cameron would be unable to dance, he was recovered enough to attend and had refused to allow any adjustment to the plans

on his account. He would sit with his grandfather, he said, and enjoy the festivities from a comfortable chair.

Ursula had hoped that Rye would seek her out, but he'd been closeted with the earl most of the day—discussing his various duties, she supposed.

Or which of his cousins he'll be marrying...

Ursula laid out her blue silk with the smallest of sighs, and was about to change into it when there was a knock upon her door.

"Lady Iona?" Ursula stepped back to allow the earl's daughter entry. "Is everything all right?"

"You won't mind my intrusion, I hope." Iona glanced about the room's meagre furnishings. "I wanted to thank you for helping Cameron. With so much commotion yesterday, I fear your kind efforts were overlooked."

"I did nothing at all," Ursula protested. "The level-head was all Lord Balmore's. I acted only as he instructed."

"Nevertheless, I'm indebted." Lady Iona pressed her hand upon Ursula's. "And I've brought something." Over her arm, she was carrying a length of amber-golden tulle. "The warm tones should suit your complexion. It was a favourite of mine in the year my husband courted me." The colour rose to Lady Iona's cheeks. "We shall not recall how many years ago that was, suffice to say that I had Cameron the following year, and the dress never fitted again. I should long ago have passed the gown to someone who would gain pleasure from wearing it." She laid it carefully beside Ursula's upon the bed.

Beneath the tulle was a layer of palest peach silk, while golden threads embroidered the yoke of the bodice. It was not in the current fashion, but the elegance of the gown was timeless.

A surge of gratitude filled Ursula's chest. "It's truly beautiful, and I'll be honoured to wear it."

The thoughtfulness of the gift touched her more deeply than she could say. She'd seen herself only as an outsider at the castle, but this kind action spoke otherwise.

"I trust you'll enjoy this evening, Miss Abernathy, though we may be a little topsy-turvy, due to Lord Balmore's novel suggestion."

Intrigued, Ursula invited Lady Iona to take the armchair by her fire.

"Food and beverages are to be set out along one side for guests to

help themselves,” explained Lady Iona, “So that our staff can join in the dancing—at least for an hour or two.”

How like him, thought Ursula. She added another brick of peat to the fire and stirred the embers.

Lady Iona seemed in no hurry to leave. There was something wistful in her manner, and perhaps rather sad. Even in a house so filled with people, one might be lonely, Ursula knew.

For some moments they sat in companionable silence, until Iona spoke again.

“The Yuletide cèilidh used to be such a gay affair, but it’s harder to persuade guests to make the journey these days, even with the train coming across the moor.” She gave a deep sigh. “Of course, we cancelled altogether last year, and Lady Dunrannoch was adamant that, since it’s only been just over a year since Lachlan’s passing, we should invite only a handful of the local notables and their families. Now, at least, with the whole household invited, we’re sure to see some jollity. Lord Balmore is insistent that everyone should enter into the Christmas spirit.”

“And I’m sure they shall.” Ursula nodded her encouragement.

“Arabella—the first Lady Balmore I should say—is terribly put out,” Iona went on. “But I think it’s a wonderful idea. It’s been far too long since we organized something of this sort—for all the household to enjoy. The Countess was a little taken aback but she’s come round quickly—with the proviso that staff will need to return to their duties at ten o’clock.”

Ursula suppressed a smile.

“Arabella’s a good sort really but she’s never understood Highland life. She’s from an old Stirling family and wants to make us just as grand here. She doesn’t seem to appreciate that the Dalreagh clan are moorland people. We’ve a brave history of raising arms and doing battle but, these days, we’re little more than farmers. The way Arabella carries on, you’d think we should be having royalty to dine every other week! Truly, I think she’d be happiest setting up home again in the city. I’ve made the suggestion more than once, but she seems remarkably attached to the idea of remaining here. I suppose we can’t always understand people’s motives.”

“It sounds as if the new Lord Balmore has the right idea, anyway.” Ursula’s heart warmed, hearing all that Iona had to say of him.

“Yes, and he and Cameron have been getting along splendidly. Lord Balmore has proven himself to be very much ‘hands on’, wanting to learn everything—and seeking out Cameron’s advice.”

“That’s good to hear. And—” Ursula hesitated, uncertain if Iona would think her speaking out of turn, “Cameron doesn’t feel resentful of Lord Balmore having swooped in, as it were, and claimed what might have been his?”

Lady Iona shook her head. “Quite the reverse. You see, it’s always been Cameron’s wish to practise veterinary medicine. He began at the university a few years ago but felt obliged to return to Dunrannoch once Brodie and Lachlan were gone. Grandfather wasn’t well enough to manage alone and we needed a male member of the family to take charge. The arrival of Lord Balmore has him ‘off the hook’ as it were—although I know he’ll be pleased to continue giving whatever support he can. He’s only twenty-two but he’s grown up here and there’s very little he doesn’t know.”

“And, I hope you won’t think me forward in asking, but how does the other Lady Balmore feel about things? She’s still grieving I know, but does she wish to continue making her home here?”

“Oh, Mary?” Lady Iona looked thoughtful. “Her own family are from Aberdeen—something big in fishing. I don’t think she’s terribly happy here, but nor does she seem keen on going back to the coast. I suppose she might remarry, in time, but really, it’s her girls she cares about most.” Iona frowned. “If we’re to find husbands for them all, it would make sense for her to take them to town. Lachlan didn’t leave her a great deal of personal wealth, but she has a set of rooms in a townhouse in Edinburgh. If grandfather might settle something on her, I believe she’d be delighted.”

Lady Iona gave an embarrassed laugh. “I’m sorry. I babble on sometimes. Please forgive me. Our family trials are our own affair—and nothing for you to worry over, Miss Abernathy. I’m sure you have your own future to look to, and will be glad to leave behind this rather desolate place.”

“I’m happy to lend a listening ear.” Ursula touched the other woman’s arm. “And I’ll never forget Dunrannoch, nor the moor. I won’t regret the time I’ve spent here.”

Lady Iona rose at last. “I must get ready, and leave you to do the same.” She gave Ursula a warm smile. “Come and find me amidst the

crowd, Miss Abernathy.”



AS THE HOUR CHIMED SEVEN, Ursula put the finishing touches to her appearance and clicked shut her door behind her.

No matter what transpires, I must remember that I'm my own woman. Just six more days and I won't need to rely on anyone for shelter or support. I may easily live quietly.

The thought should have been gratifying but, strangely, it was not. She'd never cared for Society, but Lady Iona's visit had reminded her of the comfort of friendly companionship. As for love, with the man she'd come to feel so much for, Ursula hardly dared hope.

Lord Balmore's heart was unknown to her, but he'd spoken so much of duty. How could she fit into his plans? Even were she to reveal her true family connections, and the wealth that was soon to come to her, she was not a Dalreagh. The Earl and Countess Dunrannoch had made things clear; they wanted Rye's bride to come from within their own circle.

She believed she could make Rye happy—perhaps even find contentment in helping him run Dunrannoch—but she couldn't expect him to break with his family for her sake.

She'd just turned the first spiral on the old stone stairs and was deep in her musings when she was brought up sharply by voices just below, rising from the third-floor corridor. Only Rye and Cameron occupied rooms here, Ursula understood, and both should have been downstairs by now—but the abrupt whispers were those of a man and woman, clearly engaged in an argument of sorts.

“Can't carry on like this...has been a mistake.” The man's hushed tone was insistent.

“Is there someone else? After all I've been to you...”

“Of course not, but—”

There was a pause, in which Ursula would have sworn the two were kissing.

Could she continue downward? To eavesdrop made her uncomfortable, but she feared the couple might hear her footfall and realize she'd been listening.

The woman's voice had turned sultry. “Come to my bed again

tonight...it's only you I think of."

"Impossible. You don't know what you're saying." The man's voice again. "Arabella—this has gone on long enough."

Ursula felt her legs tremble.

Arabella? Lady Balmore?

And the man's voice. Was that Cameron?

Was such a thing possible?

The two weren't related by blood, but relations between them would be unseemly. And how long had they been together? Lady Balmore's husband had been dead nearly two years, but to begin an affair of this sort?

Ursula shook herself.

What was she thinking? She'd never styled herself a hypocrite, nor wished to judge others. If Cameron and his uncle's widow were in love, it wasn't for her to criticise.

And it was wrong of her to linger. She'd heard more than she should already.

Gathering her skirts, she placed one slippered foot before the other, taking the steps as quietly as she could. She would cup the flame of her candle as she passed the opening of the stairs onto the corridor and hope they were too engrossed to notice her passing.

Setting her eyes to watch only the treads before her, Ursula resumed her descent. It had grown quiet, as if the two lovers were again embracing. All the better, for they were unlikely to sense her passing.

She'd almost reached the second floor and begun to breathe more easily when a spider's web loomed in front of her and Ursula stumbled. The candlestick flew from her grasp, clattering down several steps before rolling to a stop. With a gasp, she pressed her back to the wall.

"Did you hear that?" Lady Balmore's voice floated downward. "Someone's there."

Ursula remained frozen. They wouldn't come down the stairs after her, would they?

"One of the maids. That's all. Everyone else is downstairs—and I'm joining them." Cameron sounded exasperated.

"This isn't over. We aren't over!" Lady Balmore's voice hissed. "You'll thank me in the end Cameron, when you realize my true

devotion. No one will love you as I do.”

“I’m not listening to any more. Now Rye’s here, there’s no reason for me to remain. The sooner I get away, the better—for you as well, Arabella.”

“No!” Her voice rose but Cameron’s footsteps were already fading in the opposite direction.

Ursula let out a long exhalation.

Poor Lady Balmore. However unwise the liaison, she felt for her.



AS URSULA CONTINUED DOWNWARD, Lady Balmore went to the staircase and peered through the gloom. With silent footsteps she followed, but the figure ahead of her scurried too quickly for her to see properly who had been listening.

She caught only a glimpse of the woman’s hem.

No servant but someone in a golden-hued gown, the fabric fine.

Chapter Eighteen

A little later...

THE PARTY WAS WELL-UNDERWAY.

Lady Iona had been right. The staff appeared delighted to have been invited to the early part of the evening. Wearing their Sunday best, maids and footmen were whirling to the strains of an Eightsome Reel, to the accompaniment of a small band of players placed in the minstrel's gallery.

The countess and Earl Dunrannoch looked on, with the dowager sitting to her son's right, and Lady Iona and Cameron alongside, joined by some of the older guests.

Lady Iona smiled and nodded, clearly pleased that Ursula was wearing the dress. She'd been right that it suited her. The fit was almost exact and the colours within the gown paired well with the warm tones of Ursula's hair, which she'd pinned up with a golden ribbon threaded through the curls.

She'd find some moment to speak to Rye later, she expected, and it would be something to stand before him looking her best. Her vanity required that, at least.

Ursula stole a longer glance at Cameron.

He looked far from happy.

Little wonder, thought Ursula, knowing what she did.

Broken love affairs could hardly be pleasant things—and Lady Balmore hadn't taken Cameron's rejection well.

She looked out at the dancers. Among the throng, kicking up their heels, were the five young ladies from whom Rye was expected to choose his bride. As laughing people whirled by, Ursula caught a glimpse of Lord Balmore. Standing a head taller than anyone else, he couldn't remain hidden long.

Perhaps there wasn't much difference between her and Arabella. She'd given herself to Rye without expectation of anything further between them, yet she hoped that Rye would remember her as more than a fling.

She ought to join in the dancing at the next opportunity but, for now, she would watch. Mrs. Middymuckle had done a marvellous job with the refreshments, which were laid out along one end of the room. Fruit jellies and blancmanges and dainty tartlets wobbled alongside great plates of cold meats and cheeses. There was a huge punchbowl from which guests could serve themselves, and several bottles of champagne sat in a trough of ice.

Only Mrs. Douglas, the housekeeper, seemed disapproving, standing beside the beverages and glaring at any of her staff who dared take more than a small cupful of the punch.

Ursula hadn't attended an event like this since her season, which had only ended with her persuading her father not to bother with any more such extravagance. She'd declared that she'd find a husband in good time, rather than through an endless round of asinine parties, and he'd never pushed her to fulfil that vow. But wasn't this what her own life was supposed to be like? Dances and parties and having fun? And dreaming of someone special to be in love with?

Her season hadn't made her happy. And she'd certainly not found anyone she wanted to spend her life with. All she'd been able to think of was wanting to work alongside her father. It was him she'd wanted to be close to, and no other man was a worthy comparison.

He'd known, she hoped, how happy she was to stay with him—that no suitor had lived up to her idea of what a man should be.

It had never occurred to her that he'd die.

Nor that he'd fail to secure the passing of his half of the business to Ursula.

And, now, here she was, among people she'd never met, pretending to be someone else altogether.

It was almost fitting, for she barely knew who she was anymore, nor what she wanted. She kept telling herself that she could take care of herself and, of course, she knew that she could—but it didn't mean that it was all she wanted.

A couple of male guests drifted over, surveying the cold buffet with interest.

“He’s nae bad looking, I suppose, for an American,” one was saying. “Not that it matters, o’course. Those girls would take him whether he was young and sprightly, or hunchbacked and with n’er a tooth in his head.”

The other laughed. “I’m sure they’re making themselves amenable. There’s few would turn down the chance to be countess—and it will nae be long afore Dunrannoch passes on the mantle.”

“True enough. And a man disnae need to be in love to marry. Hot and willing is all we ask when it comes to bedding.”

As they chuckled, Ursula fought down welling nausea.

Hot and willing.

She’d been that all right.

And Rye certainly hadn’t said no.

She’d made it easy for him; and had thought it was easy for her, as well. She’d never imagined how far her feelings would become involved. No matter how she tried to fool herself, she couldn’t get away from the truth of it.

Somehow, her heart had become tangled up.

Rye had won her admiration and her respect, and she’d given herself to him without any consideration for what he might truly feel for her.

Since their return from the bothy, she’d been waiting—believing he would seek her out, but he’d been too busy to make time for her.

Actions spoke louder than words, didn’t they, and whatever he did feel for her, it wasn’t enough to divert him from the path his family had laid out for him.

Would he be different if he knew she was an heiress? If he knew her grandfather had been a viscount?

She was glad he didn’t know. Clearly, she wasn’t good enough just as she was.



THE MUSICIANS DREW the reel to a close and there was much applause from the floor. Anticipating a small break, most of the dancers were moving towards the refreshments, crowding around Ursula.

It was too much.

She couldn't breathe.

Ursula made her way to the edge, by the window, looking for the best route of escape. Bounded by unfamiliar faces, she was aware again that she didn't belong there.

She'd made up her mind.

In the morning, she'd ask which of the guests might be travelling towards Fort William and join them in leaving the castle. She'd make her way to Daphne. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to see her old friend again.

With a sob, she pushed forward, blindly—not seeing anything anymore, or anyone.

“Whoa there!” A firm hand landed on her elbow, dragging her back. “I’ve been lookin’ everywhere for you, little bear.”

She knew, straightaway, it was Rye, but it was too humiliating to play this game, and she didn't want him to see she was crying.

“Ursula, what’s wrong?” His voice softened, his face creasing in confusion. “You’re upset. Has some fella been hasslin’ you?” His eyes travelled over her. “You’re sure lookin’ beautiful tonight, but it’s no excuse for a man to foist unwanted attentions.”

She was too weary to explain what she was upset about. And what was the use, since it wouldn't change anything.

“I wanted to speak with you,” she said at last, “but I know you’ve been busy. It doesn’t matter.” She turned away.

“Hold on a minute, Ursula. I’ve been busy, it’s true—mostly talkin’ with my grandfather. I’ve had a few things to set straight, and I couldn’t come find you until I’d made sure he understood.”

“Discussing your choice of bride.” There was a flatness in her voice—a misery she couldn't put into words.

“Yes—but, how did you know?” Rye grinned. “It don’t matter. All that does is that I’ve made him see who it is I should be marryin’. He was a mite surprised but he says he won’t make the same mistake he did with my father. His disapproval only drove a wedge between them. Old Finlay doesn’t want to repeat that estrangement. As long as I’m happy, he says he is too.”

Ursula was too distressed to follow all he was saying, but if he'd chosen baby-faced Blair above her older siblings, Ursula didn't want to know about it. Had he no sensitive feeling?

Clearly not, because he was taking both her hands in his, not

caring who might see them.

“Ursula, it’s you I want, and I’m hoping you’ll say yes.” From his pocket, he extracted a ring. “This was my mother’s, and I know she’d be pleased to see you wearing it.” He lowered his voice a little, glancing about. “I got carried away, yesterday, when we were alone in the bothy. I made a mistake, but no matter what happens, we can put it right. It don’t matter to me where you’re from or what your family are and, if there’s a baby, it’ll be born in wedlock. I won’t let you face anything alone, little bear.”

Ursula frowned, looking at the ring and then at Rye.

“If there’s a baby?” She wasn’t sure what he meant.

“It was all my fault. You must’ve noticed? I didn’t...” His brow creased in embarrassment. “I didn’t do what I should’ve to protect you from that. It was just so doggone amazing, I lost my head.”

He held the ring in front of her finger. “You were wonderful, Ursula. You *are* wonderful. Just say ‘yes’ and I’ll slip this on right away. There’s no need for us to wait. You know how it works here? All we need do is declare ourselves married before witnesses and it’s good as done. They don’t mess about up here. O’course, we can have a formal ceremony later, with a white dress and all the fancies, but we don’t need to wait a moment longer. Just say it, Ursula. Say “yes” and be my bride, right here and now.”

Ursula felt her legs buckle under her. He wanted to marry her because he got carried away and made a mistake? Because he thought she might be pregnant? Did that happen when you’d only had a man inside you once? She supposed it could. It hadn’t occurred to her that it was a likelihood. Rye had murmured something about taking care of that side of things and she hadn’t given it another thought.

But she understood now.

He was asking her to marry him because he felt he should—that it was the “right” thing to do. Not because he loved her, or couldn’t live without her. Not because he needed her and couldn’t bear to let her go. Only because he had a sense of honour, and he thought she might be carrying the next Dunrannoch heir.

It would be easy to say yes—to let him slip that ring on her finger, but was that what she wanted? Didn’t she deserve better? If she was to give up on her plan for independence and entrust her future to a man, she needed to know he wanted her for the right reasons.

Slowly, she curled her fingers into her palm.

“Ursula?” Rye’s voice wavered. “Am I takin’ things too fast? I can give you more time if you need it.”

With her stomach turning somersaults, Ursula made herself look into his eyes. It was breaking her heart to do this—to turn down what she would have grasped with her whole heart, if only he’d asked her in a different way, if only she believed he was asking her for the right reasons.

“Rye...I...” She didn’t get any further.

From across the room, someone was sounding the dinner gong very loudly, and calling for attention.

“Guests!” Lady Balmore addressed the room. “On behalf of the Earl and Countess Dunrannoch, I bid you welcome. We hope you enjoy the hospitality we’re so pleased to share with you. Eat, drink and be merry.”

A round of applause rippled through the room.

“There has been sorrow within these walls, but we must look to the future. I therefore suggest a toast to our new viscount—Lord Balmore.”

Ursula felt herself blush to the roots as everyone around them turned to stare at herself and Rye, standing within the window alcove.

Arabella continued. “I know that Lady Fiona and her cousins will be eager for us to return to our dancing—” She smiled in the direction of her daughter. “But, I invite you to indulge in some festive merriment—a parlour game that was a favourite when I was a girl.”

Her suggestion was met with an excited hum.

“I expect most of you are familiar with the rules. I shall select two guests to come and hide with me, somewhere in the castle. Your task, dear guests, shall be to find us within the hour and, when you do—singly, or in pairs—join us in that hiding place. When we gather ten, our tin of sardines shall be full and all who have completed their mission shall be rewarded with a prize!”

The applause, this time, was all the louder. Several of the footmen already had their eye on which of the maids they’d like to partner with, no doubt; skulking about the house in the dark would be reward in itself!

Ursula breathed a sigh of relief. Once the party dispersed through the house, she’d slip away. No one would even notice.

Arabella, however, hadn't finished.

"Without further ado, I invite Lord Balmore and Miss Abernathy to join me in seeking out a hiding place to baffle you all."

Holding out her hands like the good Moses, Lady Balmore parted the sea of guests, creating a path across the room directly from the window alcove to where she stood beside the gong.

"Hear, hear!" shouted someone.

"Show us how it's done Lord Balmore." Ursula was sure she recognized the first footman's voice.

With his usual beaming smile, Rye offered her his arm.

There was no escape!

"Excellent!" declared Lady Balmore. "Now, we need ten minutes head start. No one should come looking for us until we're well away."

Whisking them both before her, Arabella ushered them into the hallway.

"Now, my dears, as quickly as you can, follow me. I know just the place!"

Chapter Nineteen

Mid-evening, 20th December

“DOWN THERE?” Rye squinted through the darkness beyond the door.

“Yes, go carefully on the steps. They’re rather old and worn. Centuries of castle feet scraping up and down—although more down than up, of course, this being the dungeon.” Arabella gave a tinkling laugh.

“It is a good hiding place, I s’pose.” He gave Ursula’s hand a tug. She’d gone mighty quiet and didn’t seem at all keen on the game. It was the shock of the proposal, he guessed—and then the awkwardness of the whole room suddenly turning to look at them.

He knew ladies liked to take their time in deciding to become engaged and, despite his best intentions, he’d tumbled everything out like a man spilling his guts after one too many beers. Not the suavest of proposals, he had to admit—reminding her that she might have a bun in the oven.

Goddam, Rye. You could’ve done better!

But it couldn’t be helped. He’d simply have to make it up to her.

If his grandmother could round up the pastor, they’d have a real Christmas wedding, with the bells ringing out for their happiness, as well as the day of Jesus’ birth. Wouldn’t that be something.

Arabella handed him a stump of candle and struck a match, taking an oil lamp for herself. “No one comes down here much, with it being so damp. No fireplaces for heating, just an old brazier the gaoler used to light.” Arabella held up her lamp, leading them downward. “Best of all, there’s a secret hiding place—one hardly anyone knows about. Brodie was excavating down here a few years ago and found what he thought was an old well, but the passageway leads to a hidden chamber. It’s where they must have stashed the prisoners they really

never wanted to lay eyes upon again. There were some remains..." Arabella lingered over the word, "But we had those removed, of course."

Rye felt Ursula shiver. Her eyes looked huge and her face so pale.

Was she afraid of the dark? He wasn't usually himself, but this place was darned spooky—and thinking about the poor wretches who'd been incarcerated made it worse.

"Chop, chop!" Arabella looked back at them. "We're almost there."

Reaching the bottom, she guided them through a narrow passageway, past several anterooms, until her illumination revealed a solid granite wall.

They could go no further, and he saw no sign of a well.

"Under our feet," Arabella lowered the lamp. "You see?" She kicked at the straw rushes that had been scattered over the earthen floor.

Bending, Rye made out the edges of something round and a good three feet in diameter.

"It's a lid of sorts," Arabella explained. "If we lift it, you'll see a rope ladder. Brodie attached it, to make it easier to get up and down. There's a drop of about ten feet and then you're in the chamber."

"They sure didn't do things by halves, did they." Working his fingers around the rim of the wooden cover, he prised it upward. Below, the darkness was palpable.

"You're sure about this Aunt Arabella?" Rye grimaced. "You don't think this might be going a little far?"

"Nonsense! Where's your spirit of fun?" Holding the lamp over the hole, she placed her hand on Rye's shoulder. "If you wouldn't mind going first; when you reach the bottom, you can keep the ladder steady for us to follow."

"As I'm the one wearing the kilt, that's probably the best idea." He laughed nervously then cleared his throat.

Passing the candle to Ursula, he lowered himself down. Sure enough, the rope seemed strong enough to hold him and, within a minute, he'd found the bottom.

"All safe and sound," he called up. "Come on, Ursula, I'm holding the ladder. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't want to." Ursula's voice quivered.

Rye tilted back his head, peering up at the opening. He could see

only the two women's faces, lit by a dull halo of lamplight.

Arabella laughed again. "Balderdash! We can't go back now. They'll already be looking for us."

"No!" Ursula announced more resolutely. She leaned over the hole. "Rye, you should climb back up. We shouldn't be down here. Something isn't right."

Arabella tutted. "It would have made things so much easier if you'd climbed down."

From above, Rye heard Ursula shriek.

Headfirst, she was tumbling through the air.

On instinct, Rye held out his arms and she fell straight into them, her weight knocking them both over.

"Dear God—Ursula!" Rye gasped. "Are you alright?" He was sprawled on the ground beneath her, the air having been flattened from his lungs.

"Rye!" Ursula threw her arms around his neck, her voice terribly small. "Oh, Rye. She pushed me!"

"Ahoy down there." Arabella's voice drifted down. "Still alive?"

"I think so, but what the Hell, Arabella! You could've killed us!"

"Yes, that was the idea..." Lady Balmore clucked her tongue. "You just don't seem to take the hint. Quite tiresome, I must say."

Moving Ursula to one side, Rye got to his feet. The illumination had become fainter, as if Arabella had put the lamp to one side, but there was enough light to show the rope ladder disappearing upward. He jumped to grab hold but it was already out of reach.

"Hey, what are you doing? Arabella!" Rye was getting angry now. Whatever party game this was, it sure wasn't his idea of a good time.

"I'm leaving you entombed, you ridiculous man! You and that tart. Don't think I hadn't noticed. I warned Fiona not to bother with you. You weren't even supposed to turn up. The devil knows how Lavinia came up with the address for your father in the back of beyond!"

She made an unladylike spitting sound. "As if either of you could have stepped into my husband's shoes! He was worth ten of you—but that didn't make him good enough to take on the title, nor that pompous Lachlan. Mary's better off without him. I did her a favour, really. She'll see that in the end."

"Arabella? What are you talkin' about? It's true Ursula and I are in love, but she's no floozy. It might take some gettin' used to, but I hope

you'll come round."

"Ha!" Arabella snorted. "The only thing I shall be 'coming round' to is Cameron taking the title of Viscount Balmore. Once his position is secure, I'll help old Finlay on his way, and dear Cameron will be able to make me his countess."

Rye rubbed his ear and swallowed. He couldn't be hearing straight. Either that, or his aunt had taken a strange turn. He wasn't one for believing women prone to hysterics, but Arabella wasn't behaving like herself at all.

"I overheard them." Ursula tugged on Rye's sleeve. "It's true that there's something between her and Cameron. I think they were..." Ursula lowered her voice, "lovers!"

Rye nearly choked.

"Who do you think arranged for the bagpipes to play, making everyone think Camdyn was back, foretelling the deaths of the future lairds?" Arabella gave a cackle. "It wasn't easy persuading Buckie to go up onto the roof with the gramophone player. He made such a fuss about being afraid of heights, but I told him I'd strangle him in his bed unless he did as he was told. It was easier to get him to put the thistle under Brodie's saddle, and yours! As for Lachlan, I did that myself—a quick push down the staircase and the job was done."

Dear God! She was a murderess!

"Arabella! You can't just leave us here. Everyone will be looking." He scrambled to think of a way to bring her to her senses. "They know you were with us. Nobody will believe we got here by accident."

"I'll tell them I only led you as far as the upper corridor and have no idea where you've gone—that you begged me to let the two of you go off and canoodle on your own. I'm not the only one to have noticed you have a sweet spot for Miss Abernathy here. I'll come back when I can be sure you're dead and put the ladder through the open hole—with the rope shorn through, of course, so it looks as if it broke when you were climbing."

Far above, Arabella began nudging the lid back into place.

"You can't do this, Arabella. It's inhumane! It's criminal!" Rye tried to keep the desperation from his voice, and failed miserably.

"It's fiendish!" added Ursula. "You're a bitch of the highest order!"

"I shall take that as a compliment. Now, I must go, my dears. Do enjoy the last few days together—or hours, possibly. The air isn't

terribly fresh down here.”

With that, the lid slid over completely and plunged them both into utter darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Later that evening, 20th December

FROM THE FAR side of the dungeon—which wasn't far enough, as far as Ursula was concerned—there was a scuffling sound.

A scuttling sort of scuffle, and a squeaking.

"Are those rats?"

"No, definitely not." Rye didn't sound convincing. "Mice maybe... or a hamster."

"A hamster?"

Rye had her on his lap, where she might sit without getting damp, and Ursula had her arms round his neck. She couldn't see him, but she could certainly feel him—warm and hard, and smelling a great deal better than anything else down here.

"Elsbeth and Blair keep them as pets. They might have escaped and come down here on an adventure."

"Of course. Why didn't I think of that?" she murmured, with more humour than she thought possible, given their present predicament.

"You probably would have, given time." Rye nuzzled her ear and poked his tongue into the whorl.

Ursula jumped and gave the back of his neck a pinch. "Stop that!"

"Don't you like it?" He chuckled.

"No. There are enough things down here that might be slimy without you sticking one in my ear."

"You know, it could be worse." Rye moved his right hand to cup the side of her bosom.

She shifted in his lap, but didn't slap the hand away. "You really think so?"

"There could be water rising around us." Rye gave the handful a light squeeze. "And there could be alligators in the water." With his

other hand, he found the hem of her skirt and appropriated an ankle. "And piranhas swimming between the alligators."

"There aren't any piranhas in Perthshire. No alligators either." Ursula bent her knee and Rye scooted his left hand higher.

"All right. There could be spikes descending from the ceiling, gradually skewering us." Reaching her thigh, he fumbled for the top of her stocking.

"Skewering? I swear you have a one-track mind, Lord Balmore." She turned her head, searching out his lips. When she found them, he pulled her tight against his chest and kissed her deeply.

Everything had turned out horribly.

Arabella was a mad woman.

And they were probably going to die.

But they were together.

With her eyes closed, Ursula could nearly forget where they were. Forget that it was damp and cold, with water dripping down the walls, and vermin waiting for them to become too weak to fight off a carnivorous assault.

Rye's kisses were almost that good.

Almost.

They'd already tried shouting, and climbing up the walls. Neither had worked. No one had come.

"Are you ready to say 'yes'?" Rye brought her hands into her lap and held them with his own. She felt him draw out something from his pocket—cold metal brushing her fingers; his mother's ring.

Ursula sucked her lip.

She still hadn't quite forgiven him, but he'd told Arabella he loved her. That they loved each other, actually.

He'd said it without a moment's thought, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

That must mean he believed it.

He'd defended her honour as well—telling that madwoman that she wasn't a floozy.

"You don't just want to marry me because I might already be having your baby?" It felt strange to ask when she wouldn't be able to see the expression on his face. How would she know if his answer was truthful? Would she be able to tell from his voice alone?

"Don't you know yet?" His hand came to her cheek. "I don't want

to marry you because of what we did, or because you might have conceived. I want to marry you because I can't imagine you not being here. Now I've found you, I don't want you to go away. I want you here with me, Ursula, always."

She smiled. "If I'm going to die, I suppose I might as well die engaged."

She couldn't see it, but she knew that Rye was smiling.

He slid the ring right onto her finger. "That's the spirit."



WHEN THE WOODEN lid slid back and lantern light filled the opening, it seemed so bright that Rye could hardly bear to look.

Cameron called both their names.

"By all that's holy, I'm glad to see you." Shielding his eyes, Rye waved his hand.

"She's gone off her rocker!" Cameron's voice was shaking. "I'd no idea, I swear, but she told me everything—including that she'd shut you in here."

Rye reached down to pull Ursula to her feet. "Get that rope ladder down here, buddy. It's been a helluva party, but I'm ready to call it a night. Get us out of here, and you can tell us everything."

"To think that, for a while, I thought I might be in love with her." Cameron could barely bring himself to look Rye, or Ursula, in the face. "I've been trying to break it off for months."

"We all make mistakes." Climbing out behind Ursula, Rye resisted the temptation to slap Cameron's injured shoulder. "But didn't the others get curious about where we'd gone?"

"Your grandfather was convinced that Arabella's story was true—that you two had gone off to... you know." Cameron gave an apologetic shrug, then winced, clutching his shoulder. "He said you and he had had a long talk earlier in the day and you'd told him you were going to ask Miss Abernathy to marry you. It all added up. It was only when we were sending the last guests to bed that Arabella pounced on me. She was so excited, telling me how she'd planned everything, starting with killing Brodie." He shuddered and passed his hand over his face.

Rye had to admit, Cameron looked as sick about it as Rye felt. But

had only a few hours passed? It felt as if they'd been in that hole for days.

"Where is she now?" Rye had to know.

"I left her sobbing in her room. I made it clear that anything between us was over. She's in a bad way." Cameron gave Rye a pleading look. "I'm not sure what she'll do next—whether she'll hurt herself."

Rye turned to Ursula. "We'll get you something warm to drink and I'll light the fire in your room, then I'll go with Cameron. It's too much for him to deal with on his own. We may have to lock Arabella in, until we work out how to handle this."

"There's no time for that." Ursula squeezed Rye's hand. "We need to see Arabella first. She's a danger to more than herself. We can't leave her on the loose."

"That's my little bear." Rye dropped a kiss on Ursula's forehead.

"Follow me," said Ursula. "It's quickest to take the servants' stairs."



AS THEY TURNED onto the corridor in which Arabella's bedchamber was sited, they were in time to see her emerging from the room.

"You!" She screeched at Cameron. "Betrayed! After all I did for you."

"Arabella, calm down. We can talk this through." Cameron inched along the passageway.

"There's nothing to talk about, you weasel! I don't know what I ever saw in you."

"Come back! Arabella!" Cameron called out, but it was too late.

Lifting her skirts, Lady Balmore ran in the opposite direction.

"She's heading for the battlements!" Cameron looked as if he was about to pass out. He staggered and half-fell but urged Rye on. "Go after her, please. Don't let her do anything stupid."

Round and round they climbed, Rye ahead and Ursula doing her best to keep up, taking the spiral steps of stone, past each floor until they reached the door leading onto the roof.

Rye gasped as he emerged into the night air. A hard frost was forming, coating every surface in a sheen of ice.

And it was so quiet. Quieter than the dungeon had been.

He couldn't see Arabella at first—only the stars and the sky.

The sky was huge, and the stars brighter than he'd ever seen them, up here, high above the moor.

Ursula grabbed the back of his shirt. "Where is she?" She was panting hard, having run all the way.

"Look, there." He saw her now, the wind whisking her long hair, tumbling from its pins. And she'd climbed up onto the ramparts.

"Arabella!" Ursula called. "Come down from there."

Lady Balmore turned, and there was a madness in her eyes. "Come here then, if you want to help me." She stretched out her arm, beckoning.

"No, Ursula!" But Rye wasn't quick enough. Ursula had darted past him, running to Lady Balmore.

"Wait!" Ursula's voice was whipped by the breeze. She'd almost reached her.

"No time to wait," answered Lady Balmore. Her fingers touched Ursula's and pulled her up beside her. "You'll go with me, then. I won't be alone." With that, Lady Balmore leant forward.

There was a flutter of fabric and a shriek.

"Ursula!" Rye grabbed her waist and yanked her back.

He'd nearly lost her.

So very nearly.

From far below came a hollow thud.

Epilogue

Christmas Day

“Mistletoe? In your bridal crown?” Mary pursed her lips, looking over Ursula’s ensemble one last time—even though they were standing just inside the door of the castle chapel and it was really too late to change anything. “Are you quite sure?”

Miss Abernathy might have owned up to being closely related to the Arrington viscountcy but Mary was still a little suspicious. In her eyes, decent women didn’t go galavanting about the Highlands pretending to be something they weren’t.

“She looks lovely!” declared Lady Dunrannoch. “I only worry that you’re warm enough, Ursula dear. Even with your thickest underthings, this place is as cold as the tomb.”

The countess was far more willing to reconcile herself to Ursula’s new status. Clearly, young Rye was smitten—and the girl was nothing if not resourceful. She’d hold her own amongst the Dalreaghs, Lady Dunrannoch was certain.

Iona’s wedding dress, which had been handed down from the old dowager herself, had only needed the tiniest of alterations. The lace, freshly whitened with lemon juice, was studded with tiny pearls across the bodice and down each sleeve, and the wide, square-neck of the gown was most becoming. With silver slippers and a long veil of silk tulle, Ursula’s costume was complete.

With all that had happened, it was only fitting for the wedding to be a quiet affair, but Rye was determined that their joy would push tragedy aside.

They were sharing that joy with the people who really mattered. Both Daphne and Eustace had made the journey, thanks to Campbell riding out to send telegrams, and all the family were gathered.

As Earl Dunrannoch walked Ursula down the aisle to meet her groom, Rye looked round and gave her that lopsided Dalreagh smile. The one that told her she was the person he most wanted to see in the whole wide world, and the one he wanted to kiss. The one he wanted

to spend his life with—no matter what life ended up throwing at them.

What had Miss Abernathy's *Lady's Guide* said? She'd been looking for advice on marriage and husbands, and the book had a lot to say on the subject—some of it bizarre, but most of it rather good. Or, at least, it seemed so.

There had been something about not finding your happiness by running away, and that, when you found the right person, you'd know it was time to stop running all together. That you could stand still, instead, and know you were right where you were supposed to be.

Ursula had that feeling.

She didn't need to run away from Rye.

He wasn't marrying her because that was what his family were insisting upon.

He wasn't marrying her from any sense of duty.

And he wasn't marrying her for her inheritance. She knew this for certain because she still hadn't told him, although she'd had to come clean to the pastor about her real name, and to Rye too, for the sake of legalities. It had been time to own up to not being Miss Abernathy and, strangely enough, Rye hadn't acted in the least surprised, nor appeared to care.

He was making her his because he wanted her in his arms and in his heart, and he wanted to face every bit of what came next together.

When he looked deep into her eyes, she saw that he looked serious, and just a little nervous.

"You ready to take the leap, little bear?"

"I am—if you're jumping with me."

There was the smile again. "We're gonna jump right in together." He pressed his lips to her ear. "You and me. Every day, over and over."

And Ursula smiled right back.



Meanwhile, from the battlements, the ghost of Camdyn Dalreagh looked down. He'd put away his bagpipes for the time being, having no intention of playing them any time soon. Instead, he'd tucked McTavish under his arm.

Together, they'd watch over Castle Dunrannoch and the newlyweds.

McTavish would surely leave an occasional offering on the crisp quilt of Lord and Lady Balmore's bedchamber, but it would always be given with love.



Emmanuelle lives with her husband (maker of tea and fruit cake) and her snuffle snoof, Archie, her favourite hairy pudding connoisseur of squeaky toys and bacon treats.

Do you have a moment to leave a review?
(it's the best gift you can offer an author)

Find *Christmas at Castle Dunrannoch - The Curse of Clan Dalreagh*
on [Goodreads](#), Bookbub and across all retailers.
Also on [Audible](#)

A Note on Curling

The setting for our story bears a true medieval flavour, which I hope you'll enjoy, but I did take some liberties in mentioning the game of curling: one of the world's oldest team sports.

It's impossible to say when the pastime of sliding stones over frozen water first began, with a target to aim for. For the purposes of this story, I have Ragnall and his men enjoying the game among their Hogmany festivities.

We do know that curling was certainly established by the early 16th century, as a curling stone inscribed with the date 1511 has been recovered from a pond in Dunblane, Scotland.

We also have records from 1541 of a curling challenge match (involving a monk from Paisley Abbey and a relative of the abbot).

From 1786, we have a poem immortalising the game, written by famous Scot Robert Burns.

In Scotland, when the weather permits, the game is still enjoyed outside, but all national and international competitive curling competitions now take place in indoor rinks, where the condition and temperature of the ice can be carefully controlled.

I do love a tale filled with intrigue and adventure, and this has been my mission with my 'Lady's Guide' series.

Ragnall and Flora's tale gives us a glimpse at how the 'guide' begins, written by Flora to include all her wisdom. As the volume is passed through her family, each daughter will add her own voice, until the book becomes a treasure trove of pearls.

Eventually, some enterprising young miss ensures the manuscript goes into print, enabling the guide to find its way into yet more hands (including Ursula's).

Its words will empower and inspire the heroines of many books to come.

If you'd like to receive 'first eyes' on those stories, please sign up for my [mailing list](#), so you'll never miss a thing, and you'll also receive a *free* book from the 'Lady's Guide' series. (just visit my website to find out more - www.emmanuelledemaupassant.com)

If you're on Facebook, [hop on over to join my reader group](#). All sorts of 'insider info' there (mostly photos of our beloved Scotland, and our lovely new puppy Archie)

My 'Emmanuelle's Boudoir' members are my biggest fans, and I'm there most days to chat, including sharing recommendations from my own tottering reading pile.

Everyone is welcome.

See you there.

xxx



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A mysterious island. A missing brother. Only three days before the volcano erupts.

Under the protection of darkly handsome Captain Jorge de Silva, Lady Bathsheba Asquith lands on the tropical island of Vanuaka in search of her missing brother.

The trials of the jungle strip away any pretense of propriety and passion flares, but de Silva is not all he seems, and Bathsheba is in more danger than she can imagine.

Vanuaka's volcano is awakening—and only a human sacrifice can appease its fire.





The Lady's Guide to Deception and Desire

Love is the one thing she can't fake.

Disowned by her oil tycoon father, debutante Rosamund Burnell is in a fix.

With limited funds, and a long way from Texas, the answer seems obvious.

Pretend she's still a wealthy catch, to ensnare an eligible English bachelor.

But the duke's motives for courting her are not what they seem, and Rosamund is caught in a trap.

Are the mysterious disappearances at Studborne Abbey mere coincidence?

Or does something wicked lurk within the ancient monastic walls?





The Lady's Guide to Scandal

Madly in love, or just pretending?

Celebrated adventurer Ethan Burnell is keen to return to the jungles of Mexico.

Settling down isn't part of his plan.

But his sister has other ideas, throwing a Christmas houseparty filled with eager debutantes.

The answer?

A fake engagement for the duration of the festivities!

With her name mired in scandal, Cornelia Mortmain's marriage prospects are nil.

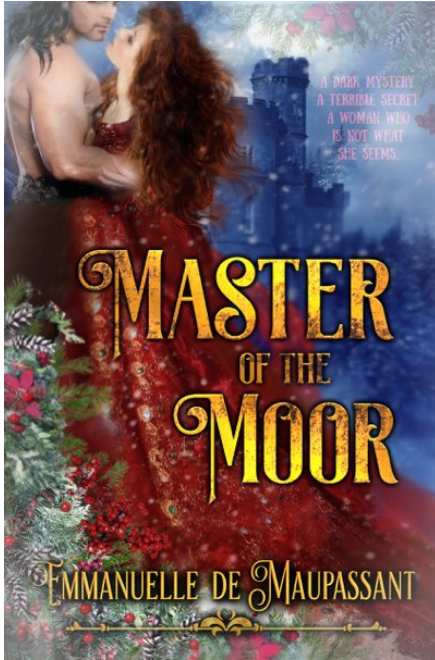
Burnell is exactly the sort of 'dangerous man' she's sworn off, and posing as his fiancée can only spell trouble.

Or, make her so notorious she'll become irresistible.

Can they convince everyone they're madly in love?

The game is on!

Also by Emmanuelle de Maupassant



Master of the Moor

A dark mystery, a terrible secret, and a woman who is not what she seems

After more than twenty years in exile, Mallon de Wolfe—formidable, handsome, and with a shard of ice where his heart should be—returns to his ancestral home to confront his past.

The windswept heathlands of Dartmoor are vast, barren and perilous.

A place of superstition, where no man walks without the moon to guide him.

Newly-widowed Countess Rosseline arrives at Wulverton Hall with secrets to protect. Haunted by scandal, she'll stop at nothing to gain what she needs, even if it means deceiving the enigmatic, yet fascinating Mallon de Wolfe.

As Mallon and Geneviève become entangled, do the moors hold their destruction or salvation?

'Master of the Moor' is a dark gothic historical romance, featuring passionate love scenes.